

Home Worship October 2022 by Revd Jack Dunion

Sunday 2nd Oct. *"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it"* John 14:14

To ask in the Lord's name in the literal sense would be to verbally say the name Jesus Christ before and after prayer. But what happens to our faith if we ask in this way and feel our prayer goes unanswered? I guess we would need to either dismiss it as untrue or we would need to conclude that these words are not meant to be taken literally. Where can we turn to help us make sense of all this? The writings for the New Church on earth which unlock the spiritual meaning of the Word tell us: "In the Word 'name' means the essential nature of a real thing, and 'seeing and calling by name' knowing characters". Arcana Celestia (heavenly secrets) No.145. This then tells us that asking in the Lord's name means our request needs to be aligned with His essential nature, which is infinite and eternal. Such a prayer will not only be answered but it will also help develop our faith and help us cope with all the challenges life throws at us? The following suggestions may be helpful in preparing for such prayers.

Before we begin we should find a quiet place away from worldly distractions. The first thing we need to think about is that the three degrees of the human mind need to be properly aligned with the Lord's essential character as this is what is meant by asking in His name. The first degree, the will, is the highest degree and if we are going to be joined with God then we need to be joined with Him in our will first. The will is the most difficult to purify and bring back to God and so it is the will which we must give the most attention to in prayer. In looking at the will we must focus on the motivation behind our prayer and what is it directed towards. To avoid deluding ourselves it might be useful to ask ourselves the following: Is my will to do the will of God? Do I love what He loves and hate what He hates? Do I love my neighbour as much as I love myself; after all, God loves them as much as He loves me. Am I as quick to see the evils in me as I am in my neighbour?

Other questions may be: Is my desire and affection directed towards things eternal, or the temporary things of this world? Do I accept that I have no goodness and no power except it be given me by the Lord? Is my own will subservient to His will, and is His will what I seek as my chief delight? If we ask ourselves these questions in God's presence it would soon highlight any delusions we have. The second degree of the human mind is the understanding. It is easy to use many words in prayer, but how often do we consider what these words mean, what they signify and imply? In our next article we will look at how we might align not only the will but also the understanding and also the third degree which is the operation of prayer in our lives.

Prayer: All merciful Lord who is ever kind and forgiving, even towards those who deny or defy You, You do not turn from those who sin against You, but seek to help them to repent and refrain from wrong ways and feel Your great forgiveness. Help us to follow Your example and love people as You do with unselfish and unconditional love. Amen.

Ref: Arcana Celestia 4154. Divine Love & Wisdom 67,184, 189, 217, 230, 232, 236.

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Sun. 9th Oct. How can a God of infinite Love and Wisdom allow bad things to happen?

The answer to this question seems difficult to answer. But once certain other things regarding the nature of God are known it can be seen that to prevent some things would lead to the worst possible outcome. We tend to think that if God is all powerful He could prevent harm to people on this physical plane. But there are two things which must be understood about the physical plane to understand why bad things are allowed to happen. One, this world is only temporary; two, it is in the world that the things within us are manifested. If the Lord's life was to flow through us unchanged, as it did with the most ancient people, there would be no evil to be seen in the world. But since His love flows through us and is manifested in the world around us then when we choose to change His love into evils, that is what manifests in the world around us. So why then does He allow us to change it? The reason for this is that the Lord must

leave us in freedom to choose His life of love; that is the only way we can appropriate it ourselves or make it our own. But in order to provide us with a choice He must allow for the possibility that we will choose our own loves which are the opposite of love and so our evils must be allowed to manifest in the world. Further, the Lord needs to allow us to find out that in rejecting Him we are choosing a life of misery and unhappiness (spiritual death). But still He must let us know this without taking away our freedom to choose. So the evils which manifest in the world around us must be allowed so we can see the consequences of rejecting Him and begin desiring to be led back to His love; like the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. In the book the Divine Providence No. 251[2] we read: "No man can be withdrawn from his hell by the Lord unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out; and this cannot be done without permissions, the causes of which are laws of the Divine Providence". The Lord created all people for heaven. The physical world is the temporary place where we can make free choices in order to appropriate to ourselves all the blessings of the Lord's life and become angels who are linked to Him in this way: from Divine Providence 27. "The Lord's Divine Providence Has as its End A Heaven (of angels) from the Human Race". If the pain and suffering we and others experience in this temporary world will lead us to an eternity of happiness then this is what the Lord must allow. To take away temporary suffering at the expense of eternal happiness would not be in the least bit wise and therefore it would be impossible for God to do who is wisdom itself.

Prayer: Omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent Lord, who is and who was and who is to come, grant us a vision that looks beyond this temporary world, these short earthly years which are but a fleeting moment when compared to life in Your eternal heavens. We praise You that You have seen fit to create us and seek our eternal happiness and well-being. Help us then to trust You and know that whatever may happen in the world around us it is under Your wise and loving providential care and that all things You permit eventually lead to good. Amen

Ref: Arcana Celestia 66, 2179, 3213, 3393, 3480, 9577, 4044. Apocalypse Revealed 665

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Sun. 16th Oct. The Lord can reach all people?

How is the Lord able to be with all people no matter what their inner or outer state? The short answer is that the Lord is with all people through allowing them to adapt His life to suit their own feelings and thoughts. His love which is the life of all people, can be used for evil or good and His truth can therefore be falsified. A person must have the freedom to do either but the life in what they do still comes from the Lord regardless. For example, if a person wants to use the life the Lord gives them to break His commands then the Lord must permit that. If He didn't permit this none of us would have the chance to change by choosing the life the Lord wants us to. The ideas produced in our understanding take the form of what we desire to do and so they appear as falsities. It is for this reason the Word of God is written according to appearances. It is adapted to the state of the mind of the writer as well as the reader. For example, there is an appearance that the Lord punishes people: "It appears to the eyes of the individual as though the Lord devastated, punished, and condemned; and because the appearance is such, it is so expressed according to appearances. Arcana Celestia 1838[2] In reality it is people who bring these punishments upon themselves. All the truths we know are only really appearances of truth, as we read in AC 3365[2]

"....it is the rational that receives and acknowledges them (doctrines); but the rational is such that it cannot possibly comprehend Divine things, for it is finite..... For this reason Divine truths from the Lord present themselves before the rational by means of appearances". If we think about it the way in which we understand truth is evolving all the time and since we couldn't possibly comprehend things of the infinite Divine, as said in the quote above, then wouldn't this mean we have the infinite capacity to improve our understanding of truth? In one sense then we are all living in the world of appearances. It is no wonder then the Lord said to the crowd of teachers and Pharisees who were about to stone the woman caught in adultery "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her". John 8:7....and as we know they all walked away!

In truth, the Lord works with all of us and continually tries to lead us out of the evils we are in, as we read in Arcana Celestia 6475[2] "the Lord flows into all.....where the good of charity exists, He is present; and He is also present where the opposite exists, but only in a way that allows Him to give them life, and as far as possible to lead them away from evil." The Lord is working with us all. The Lord said through Luke 6:41 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" In criticizing others we only deceive ourselves, because the Lord alone is good. The best we can hope for is to become more and more an image of His is pure love and pure wisdom leading us to treat all those around us with the love compassion and forgiveness that the Lord continually shows to us.

Prayer: Lord of all, as we walk life's path and interact with others grant that we may be slow to judge but quick to forgive, slow to criticise and tear down but quick to praise and build up. Take away anything which would cause division among Your people and unite us all as one church and one world serving under one Lord; as in heaven so upon the earth. Amen

Ref: Divine Providence 234. Arcana Celestia 3365, 6475, 1838

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Sun. 23rd Oct. The Passover and the Holy Supper

As the day of commemorating the Passover had now arrived, the Lord instructed His disciples "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover". The Passover originated as a festival to commemorate the deliverance of the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. In the book Arcana Celestia No. 7917 'the Passover' means the Lord's presence, and the deliverance of those belonging to the spiritual Church.

So, who are those belonging to the spiritual church? Well perhaps our clue comes from the venue chosen by the Lord to eat the Passover. He chooses the upper room of a house in Jerusalem. It was customary in those days to have an upper room; above the noise and the hustle and bustle of everyday life. A place within the house; an upper room where the world outside and below could be put aside to focus on prayer and for thinking about the Lord. The spiritual sense of the Word tells us that a house represents the mind and we can easily see why. Our house is where we feel safe; it's our own personal space. Few others know what goes on in our houses behind closed doors. The upper room within the house being above means the place within us where we can meet with the Lord. Those who are of the spiritual church visit the upper room within to be spiritually fed by the Lord. But, before eating the Passover the Lord tells the disciples "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover ". Before receiving the Lord in the upper room we must prepare it. Preparing the upper room involves a fearless moral inventory, looking within to examine our true motives. Most of our experiences in life may have taught us to instinctively deny the wrongs in us. The world causes us to develop defence mechanisms of denial. But the Lord is the opposite from the world. The Lord won't condemn us, hold a grudge or expose our evils to all those around us. There is no need for denial with the Lord. He loves us despite ourselves. A genuine and personal communion with our Lord is the most valuable activity a human being can undertake! He gives freely when we are able to trust Him with every part of our lives. We can learn how to let go and let God and prepare the upper room. That is why "Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover".

Prayer: Dear Lord, we humbly approach You and acknowledge that You alone are good, You alone are the living bread which comes down from heaven to feed our souls. Fill our hearts with the bread of life and bring light to our minds so that we will know Your will and having seen give us the strength to do. Amen.

Ref: Arcana Celestia 248, 2625, 3652, 3720, 4982, 7917, 10,184, 10,367

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Sun. 30th Oct. Light of the world

Every year on the last Sunday in October at 1am the clocks go back one hour. In theory, this practice is aimed at increasing the amount of time we spend in daylight. It extends our daylight evenings in the summer and gives us an extra hour in bed in the winter. People have debated whether this practice is a help or a hindrance since the law was passed through parliament in May 1916. Perhaps during the dark days of the war World War 1 it was thought that an increase in natural light would have a spiritual benefit. I wonder that we seem to unconsciously sense a link between natural light and spiritual light. In John 8:12 Jesus said “I am the light of the world”. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”. Light is of course responsible for our sense of sight. Throughout history people have associated a lack of light with evil. Darkness can bring a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty regarding our surroundings. Darkness perhaps also highlights in us a deep seated fear of the unknown. Perhaps we could also say that the unknown is associated with a lack of truth.

I’m sure as a child we all remember at least one time when we became convinced that a bogie man was standing in the room when the lights were out. When light is introduced the truth is revealed and all our fears give way to a sense of relief and gratitude. It is no wonder that there is an association made between darkness and what is evil and scary. We know there are two kinds of light? There is light that enables us to see with our physical eyes, and light that enables us to see with our understanding. And so we often hear people say “I see what you mean” or “let me throw some light on the matter”. The light which helps us see with our physical eyes is of course natural light which comes from the sun for example. But the light which helps us see with reasoned understanding is spiritual. Natural light and spiritual light then have this fairly obvious correspondence. It is this close correspondence between natural light and spiritual light which can help us know what the nature of spiritual light is as all the related effects correspond too. So, for example, if natural darkness causes us fear then spiritual darkness will cause spiritual fear. And since the effect of a light coming on clarifies things to the natural sight, we can know that there is also spiritual light that clarifies things spiritually. The spiritual light is given off by truths from the Lord’s Word, because he himself is truth which clarifies and manifests the divine love. The divine love is called in the Word “the Father” and this is why the Lord said in many places that He was sent from the Father (see Matt. 10:40. Luke 10:16. John 4:34, 5:24, 5:30, 5:37).

In spiritual terms, the world we are born into is just like that room with the lights out. There are many things we can fear in the world around us. Many things are yet unknown to us. The Lord said “I am the light of the world” whenever we do what we do from the Lord, it brings the light of his truth into our lives and dissipates fear, darkness and uncertainty. It is worth remembering that since fear and darkness are caused by a lack of light, and so it is light that makes these go away, we also need the Lord’s light to make our spiritual darkness go away and reveal the truth we seek. The truth is of course that there is nothing to fear but fear itself. As we read in Arcana Celestia 1321 “*all the light of truth is from the Lord, and all darkness is from man*”. The clocks going back forward increases or reduces our time spent in daylight by one hour. But the Lord though, offers us far more than natural light hours. He offers us the chance to increase our knowledge of his truth and by doing so increases our spiritual light. As the Lord Himself said:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, who gives light to all people who come into the world, grant that we turn to you for help in times of darkness and praise you for the times we are filled with joyful light. Bring light to our leaders and all those who make important decisions that all people will one day live in peace and harmony under your eternal and everlasting care. Amen.

Ref: Apocalypse Revealed 796, 897. Arcana Celestia 3395, 9684, 2353.

Home Worship November 2022 by Trevor Millar

HOME WORSHIP 6 NOVEMBER 2022

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.” Psalm 130 verse 5.

In these troubled, and for many, fearful times hope can be in short supply. When we are no longer confident of being able to heat our homes; when prices in the shops are rising almost every week with no end in sight, it can be hard to carry on calmly as normal. This is bad for us in Britain, but very much worse for those without food because of drought, floods or the war in Ukraine. Hard as it may be, this is a time to count our blessings!

Poet Alexander Pope in his *An Essay on Man* published in 1732 wrote “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.” This quickly established itself as a proverbial saying.

What do you hope for? A bigger house; better job; more money? We have all had our dreams of a better life at one time or another; if not now then in the past. So accept that having hopes and dreams for a better future is part of being human. The downside of this is that these hopes may make us unsatisfied with what we actually have. A sobering thought: what we do have right now may represent someone else’s dream! I remember hearing about a person who was sad because he had no shoes, until he met someone with no feet.

In 1 Corinthians 13 the apostle Paul talking about love says in verses 6 and 7 “Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” And in verse 13 “And now these three remain, faith hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” Love is the greatest spiritual gift but it rejoices with the truth (faith), and always hopes. It should be noted that the Greek word used for hope refers to the Christian’s joyful, sure and confident assurance in what God has promised in his Word.

It can help if we can make a little time, even five minutes, when we wake up to thank the Lord for his blessings and to start the morning tasks calmly. I would like to offer the first verse of Jan Struther’s hymn (number 251 in the *New Church songs for worship* 1986):

Lord of all hopefulness, lord of all joy,
whose trust, ever childlike, no cares could destroy,
be there at our waking, and give us we pray,
your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.”

The church encourages to be useful, and we can all make a difference. Consider the following story:

An adult was walking along a beach. It was a very hot day and the tide was out. There were tens of thousands of stranded starfish dying in the harsh sunlight. The adult laughed to see a small child tenderly picking up one starfish, carrying it down the beach and throwing it into the sea. When the child returned to collect another starfish, the adult followed the child down to the sea and said

“You are wasting your time. There are far too many of them. What you are doing won’t make a difference.”

The child threw the second starfish into the water, turned to the adult and said “I’ve just made a difference for that starfish!”

Let us make a difference. Let us be providers of hope to others.

An old prayer from the Venerable Bede to finish with:

“O Christ our Morning Star, Splendour of Light Eternal, shining with the glory of the rainbow, come and waken us from the greyness of our apathy and renew in us your gift of hope.”

HOME WORSHIP 13 NOVEMBER 2022

Remembrance each year honours the members of the Armed Forces who have served their country, and pays respects to the fallen who have given their lives in defence of our democratic freedoms. In particular it remembers the men and women of Britain, the Commonwealth and Allied nations who have fought together over the years from the two World Wars to more recent conflicts.

Its symbol is the red poppy, which grew in abundance on the shell shattered fields of Flanders during World War One – the War to end all wars! Following the loss of a friend at Ypres in Spring 1915, Colonel John McCrae was moved by the sight of thousands of such poppies flowering in the fields and wrote his famous poem which began:

“ In Flanders fields the poppies blow; between the crosses row on row, that mark our place. “
War graves are lovingly tended to this day, and are visited by veterans and their relatives.

For me one of the most moving parts of the Royal British Legion annual broadcast ceremony is when poppy petals are allowed to cascade down on those attending in a seemingly endless river of blood; each petal representing a lost life. Time stands still.

At church services on Remembrance Sunday the two minute silence at 11am is strictly observed. And poppies are worn by the congregation. We all owe these fallen heroes a great deal. This year in particular, with the war in Ukraine on our television screens, the reality of war and its consequences is no longer something just in the history books.

As Christians we believe that death is not the end; that souls are welcomed into the Spiritual World and introduced into a new life there. However the grief caused to friends and loved ones by their passing can last a very long time. Everyone has had some experience of grief, whether for the loss of a person or a pet. However Remembrance Sunday is not typically about someone known personally to us. But it is about people like us! We may not have known them but we can relate to them as ordinary human beings doing their duty, and losing their lives doing it.

There is an epitaph carved on the Memorial of the second British Division in the cemetery of Kohima in north east India. It reads:

“When you go home tell them of us and say - for your tomorrow, we gave our today.”

The concept of a generation largely lost to war is very sobering. And this is still happening in our world today. Let us pause as we think of those people, so very like us, who lost their earthly lives.

“They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old. Age shall not wither them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we shall remember them.”

Jesus said (John 15 verses 12 and 13) My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends,”

Prayer 434 from 2000 prayers for public worship (2008) by Nick Fawcett

“Lord God, in a world that’s still divided, marred by chasms of fear, hatred, envy and injustice between so many, help us to build bridges -

to do what we can, where we can,

to construct links, create dialogue and promote partnership,

bringing together those previously kept apart.

Where barriers estrange and rifts alienate, help each of us to be a peacemaker. Amen.”

HOME WORSHIP 20 NOVEMBER 2022

November is not the most enjoyable month in terms of weather in Britain, being chilly, wet and prone to get dark early. As a child I lived for November 5th – bonfire night: fireworks, toffee apples and fun! I still remember the excitement of collecting twigs to build the bonfire, and saving pocket money to buy sky rockets. Those were the days!

In liturgical terms, the month of November is very much about remembrance:

November 1st is All Saints Day. This is when we honour all saints, known and unknown. As I see many of these as exemplars of faith, I do have some favourites.

November 2nd is All Souls Day. This is when we remember loved ones in heaven, and our debt to them.

November 11th (or nearest Sunday). This is when we honour those who lost their lives in wars.

This year Advent Sunday, which begins the church year falls on November 27. So the church year ends on the preceding Sunday – today.

In Catholic and High Anglican churches this Sunday celebrates Christ the King. I can see the logic in this as the Angel Gabriel says to Mary, the mother of the Lord, (Luke 1 verses 31 to 33):

“You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.”

With Advent we will be looking forward. Perhaps now is a good time for looking back over the last twelve months. How far have we progressed on our individual spiritual journey this year? This is not easy to assess because progress is not always visible to us, though it is to the Lord. In His providence have we strengthened our spiritual roots in order to produce more fruit next year?

Some people find it helpful to reflect on their actions on a daily, self examination basis, before going to sleep.

The Lord is always with us, a wise and loving presence, and it can be helpful to remember this when surrounded by a sea of troubles. Blessed Cardinal Newman observed that:

“God’s presence is not discerned at the time upon us, but afterwards when we look back upon what is gone and over.”

When we remember how the Lord has helped us with past crises, we can be confident He is with us in our present difficulties. He knows what our soul needs for its regeneration. This has been beautifully expressed in this rather challenging prayer from St Thomas More:

“Thank you dear Jesus for all you have given me; for all you have taken away from me, for all you have left me.”

We should make peace with our past, because it has formed us, and trust in the Lord’s providence for today.

A friend has a ceramic cross on her living room wall which reads:

Cherish yesterday

Live for today

Hope for tomorrow

HOME WORSHIP 27 NOVEMBER 2022

Advent Sunday marks the start of a new church year. It is a time of expectancy and hope as we await the celebration of the birth of the Lord in a stable in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago. In the famous Christmas carol, O little town of Bethlehem, we sing in verse 1 the line "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Yet such an amazing event would have gone largely unremarked at the time.

In 2013 I was lucky enough to visit the crib museum in Greccio, Italy, where there was an amazing array of Christmas cribs. The one that has stayed with me featured a bustling inn full of buzz and life. I remember thinking that the scene looked full of light, joy and fun. But where was the crib? Then I noticed an unlit path by the side of the inn, and way back a small shaft of light coming from behind the building. I had to really look hard to see Mary and Jesus! Was this what it was really like?

Again in Phillips Brooks' famous carol referred to above, we sing at the start of verse 3 "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given." No glorious fanfare from a waiting world. This is primarily an event of spiritual significance. We are not awaiting an all conquering earthly monarch, but the Lord himself; Jesus our heavenly king.

In the prayer our Lord gave us we say "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven so upon the earth." It is in trying to love the Lord, and the neighbour that we seek to establish His kingdom here on earth. Note that we are required to love our neighbour, we do not have to like them.

Our faith calls us be useful, to some sort of action. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910 -1997) points out: "Holiness is not the luxury of the few, it is a simple duty for you and me."
" If we pray we will believe. If we believe we will love. If we love we will serve."
" We can do no great things; only small things with great love."

I find Advent a lovely but difficult season. There are so many worldly distractions like Christmas shopping, spending too much on the altar of consumerism. Endless parties and, if you are employed, the obligatory Secret Santa where you buy a present for some random work colleague.

We need to make time for our own needs, physical and spiritual. Make a date with the Lord and keep it. Let us be thankful for the unfailing love of God, who will always supply what we really need. This may include things we don't necessarily like, if there is a spiritual lesson to be learned from them. Trust in the Lord's Providence.

Servant of God Luisa Piccarretta, who was bedridden for most of her long life, believed in planting spiritual seeds of love, devotion and glory. Her advice to all Christians was "With angels and all creation say Jesus I love you."

When I was small my mother confused me by saying that the real message of Christmas was that Jesus should be born in our hearts. That as Mary gave birth to the Lord so should we.
I now understand what she meant. Perhaps this is worth reflecting on in this period of Advent.

"I would like to conclude by quoting from verse 4 of our carol:
O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel."

Home Worship December 2022 by Jan Millar

During this month we will be looking at three people involved in the events surrounding our Lord's advent and birth, John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph and on Christmas Day itself we will look at the shepherds. We will consider what all these people say to us in our lives today.

December 4th **John the Baptist** Read Luke 1: 5-25, 67-79 and John 1: 1-14

For Luke the gospel story starts with not just one announcement of a birth but two. Before Mary learns she is to bear the Christ-child, Zechariah is told his wife Elizabeth is to bear a son who will prepare the way for the coming of the Saviour. For Zechariah and Elizabeth the news that they were to have a son was nothing short of miraculous. Despite always living a blameless life and obeying the Lord's commandments Elizabeth was barren and they were both now elderly. But the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and told him Elizabeth would bear a son who would be "*great in the sight of the Lord*" and who would bring joy not only to his parents but to many people. This was of course John the Baptist, the one who came as a witness to testify concerning the Light that was coming into the world.

So what is the job of a witness? Well in a court of law a witness throws light on an event or person other than themselves. This is the key to John's life, his distinctive lifestyle and powerful preaching were not designed to draw attention to himself but to point towards Christ and so prepare the way of his coming. This was foretold in the words of the song of Zechariah where he marvelled, not at the gift of a son in his old age, but at the one whom that child would proclaim and whose way he would prepare.

We in turn are called upon to bear witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour but do we honestly do that? Do we seek his glory rather than our own? What are we doing to prepare the way for the coming of Christ into the hearts and minds of people today? That surely is something that all Christians should be addressing at this time of Advent.

Gabriel also told Zechariah that John would go before the Lord "*in the spirit and power of Elias*". Elias is the Greek form of Elijah the great prophet who had urged the people of Israel to repent and mend their ways or disaster would follow. John's message also calls upon the people of his day who were living in a time of great darkness upon earth to "*repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*". His message still holds true today as the kingdom of heaven is always at hand. The Lord stands at the door, always ready to come into our lives. All we need to do is to open the door and make way for his entrance by repenting and rejecting those things in our lives which stand in his way. So again at Advent we are reminded to look at just what it is in our lives that acts as a block or hindrance to the Lord.

Prayer: Dear Lord, remind us that we are called to witness not to ourselves but to you: to what you have said and done and to who you are. Help us to prepare a way in our hearts so that you may fully enter in seeking your glory before our own, so that in all we say and do, we may truly honour your name. Break down the barriers that keep us from you – those things that deny your love and obstruct your purpose. Make your path straight within us, so that we may play our part in your service by helping to prepare your way in the lives of others. Amen

December 11th **Mary** Read Luke 1: 26-38

Advent is a time when we naturally dwell upon Mary as she was the vessel chosen to carry the Lord in her womb. In the Gospels we are made aware of not only her words but also her thoughts and feelings.

Swedenborg tells us that the angel Gabriel represents a whole society of angels who particularly love the teaching that God himself came into the world as the Saviour Jesus Christ. Mary, like Zacharias and Elizabeth, was someone who remained devout and faithful to the Lord and obeyed his commandments. She is integral to the season of Advent second only to Jesus himself in significance. The faith, courage and commitment of this simple young girl has inspired generations across the centuries and these qualities shine out in her response to the visitation of Gabriel and the call to be the bearer of the Son of God.

To begin with she is bewildered and probably wondered why she had been chosen. Yet despite being a virgin she was willing to recognise God's ability to do the seeming impossible. Surely it is her humble acceptance of the will of God that made her above all the other young women of her time the one who was chosen as a suitable vessel for the birth of Christ into the world. She was willing to put aside her own preconceptions and accept the angel's prophecy that the holy one born of her would be called the Son of God. She must have been aware of her own weaknesses and limitations and yet she also knew and understood God's strength. She recognised his sovereignty and his ability to do whatever he wills. She measured what was being asked of her not against her own resources but against God's and was ready to let God use her as he saw fit. Her response resonates down the ages *"I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me just as you say."*

Advent calls for a similar response from us today if we truly want the Christ-child to be born in us. It isn't enough to just listen to the stories of his birth, his life and his ministry; for the Lord wants much more from us than that. He wants us to be changed. He wants our lives to be turned around and for our very self to be re-created and regenerated. He wants us to realise how we can be used in the work of his kingdom.

Our initial response may be, surely God can't use me – I don't possess the necessary gifts or qualities and lack sufficient faith, trust and commitment. However, like Mary, the Lord calls upon us to play our part using our own God given gifts. Let us use this time to reflect on what we can do as individuals to further the Lord's kingdom here on earth. Let us, like Mary, have the courage, confidence and faith to say 'yes' to God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you may not ask of us what you asked of Mary, but nevertheless you call upon us to serve you sometimes in ways we may feel to be beyond us. Teach us to never underestimate your sovereign power and your ability to use us whoever we are and regardless of our circumstances. Grant us the humility to hear your voice and the faith and the courage to respond to your call, that we, like Mary, may be ready when you call to answer: 'I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me just as you say.' Amen

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December 18th **Joseph** Read Matthew 1: 18-25

There is very little recorded in the Gospels about Joseph yet, as Mary's husband, he must have played a large part in the childhood of Jesus. So other than the fact that he was a carpenter from Nazareth, what do we know about him?

We know he was of the house and lineage of King David. In the genealogy in Matthew's Gospel tracing from the time of Abraham through David to Joseph himself he is described as *"Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."* [Matthew 1: 16]

He wasn't present when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary so he only had her word about the miraculous thing that had happened to her. Although they were betrothed Matthew's Gospel tells us *"before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit"*. [Matthew 1: 18]

His initial response was to divorce her as he knew that the child could not be his. He therefore believed that Mary had been unfaithful with another man. Joseph was obviously distressed about this but he showed his love and care for Mary as he didn't want to expose her to public disgrace or even death. According to Mosaic Law a woman caught in adultery would be executed. He therefore planned to break the betrothal privately to protect her.

However before he could do this an angel appeared to him in a dream and reassured him that Mary had not been unfaithful and that the child she carried was indeed conceived from the Holy Spirit. This calmed his fears and he obeyed the angel and took Mary to be his wife, *"but he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son."* [Matthew 1: 24] Ultimately Joseph, like Mary, was willing to overturn his preconceptions and be ready to accept that God could use this girl in the most miraculous way. He didn't know where any of this would lead but he was willing to trust in God and obey his will.

So what do we have to learn from Joseph? Well first of all we see his qualities of compassion, acceptance and trust and belief in the Lord. These are all qualities we need to strive for in our own lives. We too need to be open to God working through situations and people when we least expect it. He is always the God of surprises and with him nothing is impossible. Swedenborg tells us that Mary, the wife, represents our will and Joseph, the husband, represents our understanding. From the marriage of these two come the good and true things we show in our lives which are our spiritual offspring – they are an integral part of who we really are. In the same way that Joseph and Mary nurtured the Lord during his childhood years so we too must nurture the Lord's love that is born in our hearts when we accept him and let him into our lives.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you act in ways we do not always expect, you speak in ways we do not always understand and you come at times and in places where we least imagine you to be. All too often we fail to recognise your presence. Teach us to be awake to your prompting, to be aware of your call to us and help us to respond to you even though we may not know where it may lead. Equip us therefore Lord to walk in faith and to trust you above all else that we may live the life you want for us and play our part in building your kingdom here on earth. Amen

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December 25th **Christmas Day The Shepherds** Read Luke 2: 1-16

"There were shepherds living in the fields nearby keeping watch over their flocks by night". These words evoke an idyllic pastoral scene but that would be far from the truth. In Judea at the time shepherding was a lonely and demanding occupation. It was often a dangerous job protecting their flocks from danger through the night. It also involved working long antisocial hours and so it meant that shepherds were usually unable to attend worship at the temple or really be involved in the life of their community. They therefore held a lowly position in society and were usually considered to be social misfits, thieves and religious outcasts. Yet it was these simple men whom God chose to be the first to hear the good news of the birth of the Christ-child. They were not rich, educated nor part of the religious elite but came from the lowest strata of society. It was a pattern that Jesus was to continue throughout his ministry when amongst those he called to be his closest followers were fishermen, a tax collector and a zealot and he was regarded by the scribes and Pharisees as mixing with 'tax collectors and sinners'.

Luke tells us that it was at night that the shepherds were watching over their flocks and this is very significant. The news of the birth of the Messiah came at the darkest part of the night and the sky was illuminated by a host of angels praising God and saying *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."* In the same way the incarnation took place at a time of darkness and corruption in the world and the child born that night was to be the light of the world illuminating the hearts and souls of men and women who subsequently allowed him to enter into their lives.

Once the angels left them the shepherds left their sheep and immediately rushed off to Bethlehem to see this special child who had been born who was Christ the Lord. But they didn't just keep the good news to themselves but shared it with everyone. As Luke tells us *"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told"*. They were not only the first visitors to the manger to see the Lamb of God in human form but they were also the first evangelists.

So this tells us that it isn't enough just to receive and recognise the good news for ourselves, it is something given to us to share with others. We share it not just by telling people about the Lord but by visibly demonstrating in our actions and interactions with other people how we have been transformed through him being born into us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ we are reminded that it wasn't to the important people of the day to whom the good news was initially given but to shepherds – ordinary everyday people like we are. Help us to understand that however insignificant and inadequate we may feel, you value each one of us for what we are and help us to learn to value others in return. Teach us to see with your eyes and look for the worth in everyone remembering that you came not for the elite few but that you came for everyone. Amen