

starters for Sunday

Fourth Sunday in Advent

22nd December 2013

[ALTERNativity](#) offers their thoughts on this fourth Sunday in Advent.

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About ALTERNativity

Christmas – celebratory, joyful, Christ-centred, devoid of stress. That’s the way it should be, but for many it is not. Stress, debt, a quick nativity play and worry for many is the reality.

Alternativity works with churches and communities to develop strategies to unpack Christmas to help individual and groups:

- Resist the pressure to over spend
- Respond to Mary’s concern for the poor
- Re ignite enthusiasm for a simpler celebration
- Rediscover the Christmas story.

Just God, Simply Christmas.

Go to the website www.alternativity.org.uk to find out more about what we do and what resources we offer.

The materials for the second week of Advent come from our new resource, called “Setting the Message Free”. In this we offer tools for individuals, groups and church communities to explore the message the Angels brought, seeking peace with justice for everyone in our families, communities, nations and world. We ask – where are the Angels of today?

Setting the Message Free £10.00 plus p and p

[Genesis 18: 1-13](#)

The writer of this passage paints the background to the story in words – the oaks of Mamre near Hebron, the tent by the roadside, Abraham sitting by the door in the heat of the noonday sun, and then the sudden appearance of the Lord! The three visitors are referred to as “O Lord” as if Abraham already recognises that they have a heavenly status; or with a minor change to the Hebrew he could be addressing them as “My Lords”, referring to them as human beings. However there is little doubt that by the end of their visit, Abraham sees the spokesman of the group as representing “My Lord” or Yahweh.



He greets the three men by bowing himself to the ground in true oriental fashion, and offering them his generous hospitality. The three visitors accept his hospitality and share with him in a bedouin meal which he prepares for them – large, flat discs of bread, tender meat from a calf, and two kinds of milk – curdled (or leban as it is known today), and fresh.

According to the custom of the time and place, Sarah remains out of sight while her husband serves them the meal.

However, she is listening and hears them tell Abraham the message which they bring: that despite her advanced years, Sarah will give birth to a son by the next year. The eavesdropping Sarah laughs with incredulity, and says, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” This explains Isaac’s name – “he laughs”.

Many people call these visitors “angels”, messengers sent by God to give particular news to Abraham – news that he will one day have a son, and with this is the message that nothing is impossible for God. This confirms the promise made by God to Abraham in the previous chapter.

This passage reminds us of messengers (Angels) bringing God’s unexpected and sometimes difficult to believe words from God down through the ages – and of course, to the principle participants in the Christmas story.

It also reminds us of the words of Hebrew 13:2 “Do not to forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”

It also reminds us of the Celtic Rune of Hospitality:

We put food in the eating place,

Drink in the drinking place

Music in the listening place,

In the Sacred Name of the Triune,

For often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise.



[Matthew 1: 18-25](#)

This passage is about Joseph and the part he played in the first Christmas. The angel visits him in a dream. Joseph already knows that Mary is pregnant, and not with his baby. He has already decided what to do – he is obvious a compassionate and merciful man. Yet he is challenged by the angel to think again, and to take her as his wife. This passage is dealt with in detail in the following sermon outline.

Sermon

Joseph and the Angel – or – a Hero Fit for Christmas.

1. An Ancient and Contemporary Dilemma

Even though most of us do not want to hear this,
“there is nothing new under the sun!”

Joseph was facing what might be one of the oldest dilemmas in the world – his woman was pregnant, and he knew the baby was not his!

To him, and to so many others before him and since who faced and face the same dilemma, the hurt, the pain, the anger, the loss, the grief, would be deeply personal and utterly shattering.

Can you imagine his horror, his dismay, his pain, his anger?

Faced by such betrayal by the woman who was to be his wife, what do you think Joseph should do? We are told he was a righteous man, and that tells us that he would know the Jewish Law, and also try to follow it. According to the Law and to their custom, he and Mary were engaged, and would have been living as man and wife, but with no sexual relations.



After a year, they would move on to marriage, and would then live together intimately. All of this would have been contained in a marriage contract – pre-nuptials are not so new then! – and what Mary had done was to break the contract. In their Law, he could have had her (and the man who had made her pregnant, if they found out who he was) stoned to death.

2. Joseph Shows his True Character

Even before he heard from the angel, God's Messenger, we are told that Joseph had considered the situation. He had thought it over very carefully.

He had decided to save Mary from public disgrace. Instead he would divorce her quietly, thus bringing their contract to marry to an end. He clearly did not believe he wanted to complete their agreement to marry, and bring up the baby as his own, but he was prepared to end their betrothal as quietly and privately as possible.

Mercy triumphed over the desire for revenge, and even over his desire for justice.

What a great guy Joseph was!

Could this be why God chose him to be the adopted father of His Son?

When the angel came with his astonishing message from God, Joseph had already decided what he would do. When he heard what the angel said, could he change and become even more generous, and good, and obedient?

3. Joseph and his Adopted Son

Joseph had already opted for mercy before justice or even revenge. Now he opted for obedience to God before personal pride.

I expect he knew that if he did what the angel told him God wanted him to do, he would be seen by others to be less righteous than they had thought! He would be seen as a man who could not wait till he was married, but instead contravened the betrothal agreement of chastity till marriage. Joseph would have made himself vulnerable to the sniggers and gossip and disapproval of others.



The angel was very clear about it all. Mary's pregnancy was the work of the Holy Spirit; she would give birth to a boy, who would be called Jesus. Jesus means "the Lord saves", and he would save his people from their sins. The angel put all this into a context which the religious Joseph would understand – the angel related it all to a prophecy from Micah 5:2. "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

I expect Joseph thought about it all again. Carefully.

When he woke up, Joseph did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him to do. He took Mary home as his wife. He did not consummate their union until after she gave birth to a son. He called this baby boy, Jesus. He was a father to him for as long as he – Joseph lived – we know he taught Jesus his trade; he and Mary took Jesus to the Temple at the right times of his life; he and Mary had other children who were Jesus' brothers and sisters. Jesus knew the Law – probably because Joseph guided him to know the Law and to worship in the synagogue.

Mercy before revenge. Obedience before personal pride.

What a man Joseph was – a man fit to be the earthly father of God's Son.

A super-hero for Christmas.

4. The Message at the Heart of Christmas

The story of Joseph and the angel points wonderfully to the message at the heart of Christmas – a message of undeserved love; of care for the weak and the vulnerable; a message of putting others before self; of the victory of humility and boundless generosity over revenge and pride.

Thanks be to God!



Meditations/Questions

Joseph and the angels: [Matthew 1:18 – 2:23](#)

The congregation may want time to ponder this man Joseph and an appropriate response to the sermon might be a time of led meditation or a short conversation with neighbours; here are some questions to ponder for a conversation.

What is so special about Joseph?

What do you think Mary saw in him?

Is there any way you would want to be like him?

What do you think would have happened had Joseph not ‘taken Mary into his home’?

Or in a led meditation:

Spend some time in an imaginative conversation with Joseph exploring what this whole experience must have been like for him.

Tell him how you feel about the part he played in this whole story.

What might God be asking you to do deep inside yourself?

What is stopping you ‘getting up and doing what the angel of the Lord is telling you to’?



Time with Children

Young children will not understand the great sacrifice made by Joseph, nor the risks he took in obeying the angel; nonetheless it would be good for them to know he was an active player in the unfolding drama.

Take along a nativity set, and ask the children which is their favourite part of it – Mary, baby, angels, shepherds, donkey etc usually all get a mention!

Then if no one (or few people) have said Joseph, pick him up and ask them if they know how important he was?

Stress that without him, Mary would have been in real danger travelling to Bethlehem, and having a baby on her own; explain that he had a dream in which an angel explained that she would be giving birth to God's son, and he was to be part of the earthly family – a very, very important part! He would be like Jesus' adopted father and support Mary in bringing him up. Talk about what makes a good father, and point out that what we read in the Bible means we know that he taught Jesus his trade, and helped Mary to bring up Jesus and his brothers and sisters – took him to the Temple when he was the right age to go there, and helped Mary look for him when he was lost. We should never underestimate the part Joseph played when he was asked to by God's messenger, the Angel!



Opening Responses and Prayers

Angel Voices

Leader: Just when life seems cosy
And comfortably predictable:

**All: angels appear unexpectedly,
and point us in directions
we would not have chosen**

Leader: Just when we have reached the point
Of comforting assurance in our respectability:

**All: angels appear unexpectedly,
and pose uncomfortable questions
we would not have chosen to face.**

Leader: and when we have followed the pointings of angels
and answered their disquieting questions
and we feel that things cannot get any worse:

**All: angels appear unexpectedly,
and remind us that “all shall be well,
and all shall be well,
and all manner of thing shall be well.”**

Leader: For the God of love works to good in all who fear Him.

**All: the God of love works to good
in all who dare to listen for angels.**



Prayers

God send us an angel,
because in this season
we read the stories which tell us
that you have done it before;
because we - in different ways -
still deal with hope and disappointment,
faith and fear,

**All: God, send us an angel,
 or give us a dream.**

When the world wearies us,
when we seem to walk on a treadmill
but really need to dance on a trampoline,

**All: God, send us an angel,
 or give us a dream.**

When life seems to throw at us
the opposite of what we want;
when we find ourselves asking
how will I cope?
how will they manage?,

**All: God, send us an angel,
 or give us a dream.**

When we cannot see beyond
the hurdles in our way;
and the past seems a safer place
than the future,

**All: God, send us an angel,
 or give us a dream.**



Musical Suggestions

Advent Hymns and Carols

- CH4 277 Hark the Glad Sound, the Saviour Comes
 CH4 316 Love Came Down at Christmas
 CH4 319 Of the Father's Love Begotten
 CH4 472 Come, though long-expected Jesus

Hymns reflecting "call his name Jesus"

- CH4 471 To the Name of our Salvation
 CH4 481 Jesus is the Name we Honour
 CH4 774 Jesus, name above all names

Hymns reflecting Joseph's dedication

- CH4 502 Take my life, Lord, let it be
 CH4 505 All that I am, all that I do
 CH4 511 Your hand, O God, has Guided
 CH4 551 In Heavenly love abiding
 CH4 596 Breathe on me, Breath of God

Hymns reflecting the message of the angels

- CH4 281 People, look, East. The time is near (of the crowning of the year)
 CH4 283 The voice of God goes out to all the world
 CH4 291 When out of poverty is born, a dream that will not die
 CH4 362 Heaven shall not wait
 CH4 498 Angel voices ever singing
 CH4 521 Children of God, reach out to one another.
 CH4 606 Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders
 CH4 710 "I have a Dream " – A man once said
 CH4 607 The Bright Wind is blowing, the Bright Wind of Heaven



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Pray Now 2013](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#). [Revealing Love](#) will be available to purchase from November 2013.



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music magazine [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to ALTERnativity for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

