

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 21 December 2025 - The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Lectionary Readings (*depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on*)

Isaiah 7.10-16; Psalm 80.1-8 [18-20]; Romans 1.1-7; Matthew 1.18-25

Homily

Today's homily has been written by the Revd Jennifer Totney, Director of Contextual Training, Westcott House

“Have you chosen a name yet?” It is one of the questions often asked of expectant parents, and one that often looms large among the many things that need to be done in preparing for a new baby.

I wonder if there is a story behind the choice of your name? Perhaps you are named after a significant person- a friend or relative. Perhaps it is the sound of your name that was most important. Perhaps a list of names and meanings was pored over to ensure the right match.

In these few days before we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we hear Matthew's version of the events leading up to this great moment. In Luke's gospel we hear Mary's story, but Matthew tells things from Joseph's point of view. But unlike with some parents in choosing a name, there is remarkable agreement between the two here. I suppose the visit of an angel might help with that!

I say there is agreement, and there is at least about the 'first name'. The angel tells Mary in Luke's gospel, 'And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.' (Luke 1.31) Matthew tells us that the angel reassures Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. 'She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus.'

In these final days of Advent what does this name mean for us? The name Jesus is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means 'The Lord is salvation'. In the Hebrew bible (the Old Testament), Joshua is Moses' assistant and successor, the one who leads the people of Israel over the Jordan and into the promised land. So, this name speaks to us of hope - hope for a future salvation. Some Jews of Jesus' time were looking for a military leader, as Joshua became, to free his people. They were actively hoping for a 'saviour' who would restore the promised land.

Yet this doesn't quite seem to be what the angel promises. This Jesus, this Joshua, will save his people from their sins. This theme is also familiar from the Hebrew Bible. It is often the sinfulness, the faithlessness of God's people which gets in the way of receiving the promises the Lord longs to fulfil. Again and again, God's faithfulness restores and forgives his people. So here is a promise of a new Joshua, who will offer that salvation in himself.

Perhaps it is not a theme we are so used to considering at Christmas, but the angel reminds us that in expecting a saviour we are conscious of our sin. A reminder of the ways we have failed to respond to God's faithfulness as individuals, as churches, as communities. The message of Advent, the promise of a saviour, offers us hope that the cycles of fear and greed, of war and conflict which human beings get ourselves involved with, can be broken. That Jesus the saviour can free us from this and lead us towards a better future.

But this is not the only name that Jesus is given in this passage. We are so used to the name 'Jesus Christ' that we can forget that 'Christ' or 'Messiah' is more like a title, than a surname. This name is not given by the angel, but is the way Matthew introduces Jesus. Messiah means 'anointed one' and is connected with expectations of a saviour. It also means 'chosen.' The one who is anointed by God as king or priest or prophet, is the one God has chosen. In these days before Christmas, this is a helpful reminder that God often chooses unexpected people in unexpected places. David was the youngest son of Jesse and his father did not even think it worth him being there when the prophet came to anoint a new king. Yet he was the one God chose. Joseph, the carpenter, is engaged to a woman found to be pregnant before they were married. Who are they to be the parents of God's anointed one? Where are the places we might not think to look for God in these coming days? Who are the people we would not expect him to choose? Jesus' name Christ, Messiah asks us to be ready to welcome him – even in the most unlikely situations. We will be ready to do that this Christmas?

The final name that Matthew gives us today seems to be more like a middle name which might feel very significant to the parents who have chosen it, but is hardly ever used and largely forgotten about. 'Emmanuel' does not seem to be a name used of Jesus during his lifetime, yet it becomes central to how his disciples understand who he is. 'God is with us' captures the mystery of the incarnation in a few words. This name tells us of God's longing not only to save his chosen people, but to be present to them in a new way. In Jesus Emmanuel, we know God's presence in our human life, its joys and sorrows. In all the busyness and complexity of these coming days – whether we are surrounded by family and friends, whether we are alone and lonely - this name reminds us to take a moment to pause, and to know Jesus with us, in the depths of our hearts. As Jesus says at the very end of Matthew's gospel, 'Remember I am with you always to the end of the age' (28.20).

Have you chosen a name yet? Jesus, Saviour, Messiah, Emmanuel. As we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, we are reminded of the depth of all he means to us through these and many other names. I wonder which of these you most need to call on this Advent and Christmas? May these names help us to prepare for his coming into our lives, our churches, our world, in new ways once again.

Ways to Engage all Generations

When different generations are gathered together in worship there is an opportunity to build relationships and to encounter God in our conversations as we build relationships and learn from each other no matter what our ages, stage of life or faith and for all present to feel included. Adding some wondering questions to the service at an appropriate moment can help to do this.

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder what your favourite part of the story/passage is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder who your favourite character is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder how Joseph felt when the angel appeared?
- I wonder how Joseph felt when the angel gave him Jesus' name?
- I wonder how you feel about _____?
- I wonder where you are in this story?
- I wonder what part of the story is about you?
- I wonder why _____ said _____?
- I wonder what we can learn about God in this story?
- I wonder what is your favourite name for Jesus?
- I wonder what this name means for you?

Suggested intercessions

Let us pray for the coming of our saviour:

Come, Lord Jesus

Come, Lord Jesus.

Jesus, Saviour, we pray for peace in the world. We pray for salvation from the sin of war and conflict. Strengthen those who are working to establish and maintain peace in the troubled areas of our world. Save those whose lives are torn apart and bring them your peace.

Come, Lord Jesus

Come, Lord Jesus.

Jesus, Messiah, we pray for leaders in the church and in the world. We pray for Bishop Sarah as she prepares to take on the role of Archbishop of Canterbury. We pray for our Bishop, and for all chosen to serve you in communities and churches. Help us to notice the unexpected people you are calling. We pray for kings and leaders of the nations. Given them wisdom and courage to seek justice and flourishing of all people.

Come, Lord Jesus

Come, Lord Jesus.

Jesus, Emmanuel, we pray for all those who need to know your presence at this time. We pray for those who find this season difficult through grief, or stress, financial struggles or family breakdown. We pray for all those who are sick in body, mind or spirit, and for all those who are lonely. May they know that you are with them, bringing your comfort and light.

Come, Lord Jesus

Come, Lord Jesus.

Suggested hymns/songs

At the name of Jesus

Come thou long expected Jesus

Hark the glad sound, the Saviour comes

Jesus, name above all names

Like a candle flame

O Come O Come Emmanuel

The angel Gabriel from heaven came

Activities to accompany the service

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- [reflectionary.org](https://www.reflectionary.org/) – lectionary-based resources
- [engageworship](https://www.engageworship.org/) – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@lectionary resource)