

ADVENT 2021

AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART



PREFACE

The season of Advent encourages us to watch and wait for the coming of King Jesus. Throughout the Bible the hope of God's coming King (Messiah) came to be inextricably linked with the name David. God's future king would be from David's house, a son of David. David became the yard stick against which all future kings were measured. The prophets even spoke of the coming Messiah simply as "David, their king." As we sing the wonderful advent hymn, "*O come o come Emmanuel*" the name of David will also resound from our lips, "*O Root of Jesse ... O Key of David ...*".

But who is David? Why should his name be attached to such great promises of hope? This Advent we will encounter the life of David as told in the Book of Samuel. The character we meet is one of the most complicated and contradictory characters in the Bible. Shepherd. Musician. Warrior. Messiah. Fugitive. Bandit. King. Adulterer. Murderer. Strong leader but weak father. Principled and loyal yet pragmatic and shrewd. Noble and lovable yet deceitful and ruthless. How could a man such as this be the one whom God sought out "*after his own heart*" to be ruler over his people (1 Sam 13:14)?

As we follow the life of David, we will see God's heart to provide a king for his people. And so, in David we see a moment of God's great plan to save and protect his people, climaxing in David's greater Son, Jesus. In God's choice of David as king, we meet a rescuer from humble and obscure origins ... God's Anointed One who is nevertheless rejected and persecuted. And so, in David we see the pattern of the Messiah, King Jesus – the ultimate man after God's own heart. But we will also see that, in David, God chose a deeply conflicted and divided man who fails often as he seeks to follow God's call on his life. And so, in David, we also see a reflection of ourselves in all our wonderful and woeful contradictions and we are asked, once again, to assess our own hearts and readiness for Christ's return.

Each day there will be a portion of Samuel to be read (usually about a chapter) alongside a reflection written by one of our contributors from throughout the diocese. As this Advent marks the launch of our new diocesan rule of life (The Vine), each Sunday's devotion will reflect on The Vine based on a psalm associated with David; similarly, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day will also reflect on a Psalm.

Join us on this journey through the life of David, a man chosen "*after God's own heart.*"

The Revd Andy Meeson, Vicar of St John's, Leyland

WEEK 1 SUNDAY 28TH NOVEMBER

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The vine – an introduction

READ: PSALM 23

'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.'

Psalm 23:1-2

In King David we have perhaps the original good shepherd (Ezekiel 34.23), a forerunner of Jesus Christ. This seems especially appropriate on Advent Sunday, as the Church remembers the Patriarchs, the 'ancestors' of the Israelites, and the first people of faith who prepared the way for the Incarnation.

The image of the shepherd is immediately relatable, so much so that it was the most popular way the earliest Christians depicted or symbolised Jesus. Today, Psalm 23 is often used at funerals, but its shepherd imagery is nothing new: we find paintings of Christ the Good Shepherd in the burial places of the Second and Third Century catacombs in Rome, as well as in one of the world's earliest known churches, at Dura Europos in Syria.

In John's Gospel, the Good Shepherd *"lays down his life for the sheep"* (John 10:11) but more generally we understand the shepherd as One who calls (John 10.27: *"my sheep hear my voice"*) and One who guides (Psalm 23.2: *'He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters'*).

2022 will see the launch of The Vine in the Diocese of Blackburn. Fundamentally this is a framework for living out a Christian life. As such it is a resource to reflect on our Christian calling and on what guidance we need: to be *'led beside still waters'*; for God to *'restore our souls'* and to *'lead us in right paths'*. The Vine is very deliberately not prescriptive, telling participants how often they should attend church or how many minutes they should spend in prayer. Instead, it invites participants to set their own (ambitious) targets, as a way to abide, grow and bear fruit in Christ. The Vine does this through three questions:

How can I make space for God?

How can I keep growing as a Christian?

How can I show the hope and joy of Jesus Christ in the world?

Advent, like Lent, provides an opportunity to think about how we can deepen our relationship with God. The Psalmist tells us that God is with us, that He prepares a table for us and anoints us. But instead of compelling us, God gives us free-will to respond. So you are invited to be part of the Vine: to listen and to follow freely where Jesus Christ calls, He is both the True Vine and the Good Shepherd.

The Revd Canon Dr Rowena Pailing, Canon Missioner, Blackburn Cathedral

READ: 1 SAMUEL 16:1-13

'The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' **1 Samuel 16:7b**

Advent is all about looking at the heart! The Church encourages us to spend the twenty-seven days of this year's season examining our own hearts. Why? For we believe, as Christians, that God in Christ is going to return to judge the world and put all things right—and so Christians are to prepare themselves and we are to get ready for this momentous Day with the help of the Scriptures.

Today, we begin with the calling of David, the son who isn't named until the end of our reading and who everyone forgot to invite to the feast. David is the youngest, the least, the one left to look after the sheep. David is living at a critical moment in the story of God's people, Israel. Their king, Saul, has turned his back on God, and now God's prophet, Samuel, is rightfully worried (v1a). Now that Israel's king has turned against God, will God now forsake them, destroy them or let Israel's enemies destroy them wonders the prophet? No, replies God instantly (v1b), He hasn't finished with His people and, in fact, He's already provided a new king for Israel. Even in disaster, it seems, God has everything in hand.

We now come to the key verse for we're told, in verse 7, that "*the Lord looks on the heart*". Samuel is looking for an impressive, handsome, tall, and gifted warrior and so likes what he sees in Jesse's eldest son, Eliab (v6). We do the same, don't we, with our social media accounts and our quick checks in the mirror before leaving the house? God doesn't care about any of that, He looks at the heart and He guides Samuel to make the right choice. David looks unimpressive and the One David points to, Jesus, looks just as unimpressive... but not to God. For what matters to God, is David's, is Jesus', is your heart.

What a relief: it doesn't matter in the grand scheme whether we're fat or thin, having a good-hair-day or bad-hair-day, have loads of friends or are ignored by everyone. The world may judge us that way—God does not. What a challenge: for I can easily wash my hair, put on clean clothes and add some make-up, but none of those things impress God. God looks at my heart and, to be honest, that is a mess! And so this Advent, we're encouraged by the Church, through the Scriptures, to work on our hearts. How? By looking to God, seeing His heart for the lost, for the sinners, and for the messed up—in other words, those with messy hearts just like us—and asking Him to change our hearts to love Him and His people more. This is the Advent work we begin, with the Spirit's help (v13), today.

The Revd Michael Print, Vicar of St George's, Chorley

READ: 1 SAMUEL 17:25-28

‘David said to Saul, “Let no one’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” [...] The troops of Israel and Judah rose up with a shout and pursued the Philistines as far as Gath and the gates of Ekron.’ 1 Samuel 17:32,52a

Who do you identify with?

Who we identify with affects how we understand a story. If we identify with David (as we often do when we first encounter this story when we are young and physically small!), it's an encouraging tale about how, with God's help, a good little 'un can beat a bad big 'un. No matter how small you feel, or how big your opposition, you can overcome by trusting God.

What happens if we identify, not with David, but with the soldiers in Saul's army? (There's good reason for doing this. Whilst reading the Bible individually is a really helpful thing to do, the Bible was written to be read and understood as part of a community.) Imagine with me: there's a big and powerful enemy; there's no way we can hope to beat them; we're terrified; we need a hero to rescue us.

Look, someone is coming to take up the challenge of rescuing us! But who is this? Not a tall, strong man in heavy armour, but a youth, a mere child. That's not the sort of hero we were expecting. It seems presumptuous that someone so weak thinks he could take on someone so strong.

Wait! Our seemingly weak, unlikely hero, has triumphed! The Lord's anointed, His Messiah, has won a great victory over the forces of evil and oppression! We are free! We can join in the spiritual battle, confident that God has already won the decisive victory through His unlikely-looking anointed hero.

That's the story of 1 Samuel 17, and it's the story of Advent and Christmas. We cannot free ourselves from oppression, evil, sin, death. But God has sent his Messiah to rescue us. He may not look like we expect a conquering hero to look. Yet the weak baby of Christmas would go on to win the greatest battle the world has ever known, and He invites us to join him in sharing the spoils of victory.

Heavenly Father, thank you for Jesus Christ, your Messiah.

Thank you for His victory over oppression, evil, sin, and death.

Thank you for His incarnation, for His gentleness and meekness, for His suffering and death.

Strengthen us to trust in His victory and to join in the spiritual battle,

in the name of Jesus Christ and in the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen

The Revd Matt Hornby, Vicar of Coppull, and St John the Divine, Coppull

READ: 1 SAMUEL 18:1-30

'David had success in all his undertakings; for the Lord was with him.' **1 Samuel 18:14**

Have you ever met someone and recognised the presence of God in them and in their lives? Perhaps through their personality, humility, or hospitality. How did that encounter make you feel? I have been blessed on many occasions to have come face to face with the Lord through the actions and words of people around me and my life has been the richer for it, my faith has increased because of it. However, we read in this chapter that when Saul recognises the presence of God in David, he is afraid. This fear is so great that it manifests itself in a deep desire for David to be killed in battle. I wonder, could this situation be comparable to the fear felt by the Pharisees who, recognising the presence of God in Jesus, plotted his death in such a way that it would seem not to be their fault?

It says in the book of Proverbs that it is wise to fear God, but it also says, "the fear of the Lord is life". (Proverbs 19:23) If Saul and the Pharisees had taken this teaching to heart then, perhaps instead of a desire to destroy life, they would have been richly blessed and given life.

The writer of this passage intentionally follows each statement that the presence of "the Lord was with was with" David, with a declaration of David's success. I conclude from this that we are to believe that a life filled with the presence of God will be a life filled with success, not fear. Life lived in the presence of God is not necessarily easy, perfect, or without mistakes, yet it is successful. David's whole life is a testament to this.

As you read more of the story of David you will hear of his triumphs and failures at the same time as seeing that the presence of the Lord, is a constant truth, that never leaves him. The same constant Truth is always present in our lives. When we recognise it, it is wise to be fearful but not afraid. Welcome the presence of God and embrace the success it brings. It is not success as the world measures it, in finances and material items. It is eternal hope, joy, peace and above all, unconditional love. In verses 17-18 when Saul offers his daughter in marriage to David, David declares himself to be unworthy and a poor man. David is in fact far wealthier than King Saul because the Lord is with him and therefore, he is rich beyond measure. Time and time again throughout Scriptures we are told that because God is with us then we are enough, we do not need to try to be anything but ourselves because "if God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31) and our lives like David's will be a success.

Lisa Fenton, Diocesan Adviser to Primary Schools & Academies and SIAMS Manager

READ: 1 SAMUEL 19:1-24

Jonathan told David, "My father Saul is trying to kill you; therefore be on guard tomorrow morning; stay in a secret place and hide yourself. I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak to my father about you." **1 Samuel 19:2-3**

As I write, the latest James Bond film has finally arrived in the cinema. Perhaps not everyone's idea of an ideal role model, but there can be no arguing that time and again Bond has saved the day enabling us to sleep safe in our beds! That said, on many occasions 007 only survives thanks either to the inexplicable forbearance of his opponent or the intervention of a friend or ally. The same, it would seem, could be said of David: brilliant on the battlefield, he remains vulnerable to the repeated personal attacks upon him by Saul. Why God should single out David as the anointed successor to Saul and then repeatedly place him in such jeopardy is a mystery, although it certainly makes for a nail-biting narrative. But it also brought out the best in the members of Saul's family whose loyalty to David ensures his continued survival. Jonathan, Saul's son, intercedes on his friend's behalf, arguing that his father has no good cause to kill David but, on the contrary, thanks to David Israel had won a famous victory over the Philistines. He also reminds him that the real victory was the Lord's, and so to kill the Lord's chosen champion would amount to a grave sin. Saul is pacified, and swears that David shall not be killed. Like Bond, David lives to fight another day.

[David] reminds us both of our need for God's grace and mercy and of the love and support of those whose love and loyalty we enjoy.

It is not long though before another day arrives. Roused once again into a murderous fury Saul hurls a spear at David who flees, only to find that even his home is no longer a safe place. So with the aid of Michal, his wife and Saul's daughter, he is let down from a window while Michal arranges a dummy to take her husband's place in bed to fool Saul and his agents, so allowing David to make good his escape.

Perhaps we shouldn't trivialise the story of David by comparing him to a flawed and all too human hero of contemporary popular fiction, but perhaps that is the point. Archetypal monarch David may be, but he too is also flawed and all too human, as indeed we all are. He therefore reminds us both of our need for God's grace and mercy and of the love and support of those whose love and loyalty we enjoy.

The Revd Jonathan Carmyllie, Vicar of the United Benefice of West Pendleside

READ: 1 SAMUEL 20:1-23, 34-42

Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, "The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, for ever." He got up and left; and Jonathan went into the city.' **1 Samuel 20:42**

Of all the Old Testament characters I should love to have met, Jonathan would be at or near the top of the list. What a beautiful character! He shares David's remarkable ability to inspire love and loyalty, but without the darker aspects of David's person. He inherits his father's leadership qualities and immense personal courage, but without the disastrous lack of wisdom that will ruin him. He seems to have no flaw. You know he would make a great king.

Jesus, said, "He must increase, I must decrease." Jonathan would have known what it was to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done."

But that will never be because God has reserved that for another. Indeed, almost the last words Jonathan speaks to David are, "You will be king and I will be second to you." This is what makes this beautiful friendship so remarkable. This is not just any old friendship between two young men. This is loving, loyal friendship to one who will take his place; one who should be his greatest rival.

The way of the world, of course, is to kill rivals. We see it all the time today. It is Saul's way—*"As long as he lives, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. He must die!"* (v.31). But for Jonathan it is not about 'me and my kingdom' but 'him and his kingdom.' Here we see the beauty of loyalty to God's king. Jonathan would have understood John the Baptist, who, when followers were turning to his cousin, Jesus, said, *"He must increase, I must decrease."* Jonathan would have known what it was to pray, *"Your kingdom come, Your will be done."*

We also see the costliness of loyalty to God's king. There is no happy ending to Jonathan's life. And perhaps most painful and costly of all was knowingly choosing David over his own father. That remains the sorrow of many in the world today when they choose Jesus to be their king—their choice illustrating Jesus' stark words, *"Whoever does not hate his own father...cannot be my disciple."* Luke 14:26.

The world, like Saul, says it's all about 'you and your kingdom'—living your dreams and fulfilling your potential. For Jonathan, it was all about fulfilling his promises. That was costly, but beautiful, too.

How might Jonathan's life inspire you to love your king, Jesus, and to pray to your heavenly Father, *"Your kingdom come, Your will be done"?*

The Revd Philip Venables, Vicar St John's, Whittle-le-Woods

READ: 1 SAMUEL 24:1-22

‘David said to Saul, “Why do you listen to the words of those who say, “David seeks to do you harm”? This very day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you into my hand in the cave; and some urged me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, “I will not raise my hand against my lord; for he is the Lord’s anointed.”’ **1 Samuel 24:9-10**

Tis the season of good will! Or the season to be wary if you go for a wee in a cave! (see verse 3 if you didn't expect toilet breaks to be included in the Bible).

I often find this encounter between David and Saul a strange encounter. The chase is on, who will win? Who will die? David is in the wilderness hiding in a cave while Saul has three thousand of his best soldiers in pursuit.

This passage is like one of those tense moments in Line of Duty and more recently in Vigil. The lights are off, someone enters a building and everything about the suspense and the music leads you to believe that someone is lying in wait – or are they?

David is hiding at the back of the cave and Saul has no idea. Saul is mid toilet break. What's David going to do? It's game over for Saul, surely?

David creeps up, the suspense builds. He cuts a corner of Saul's cloak and then he goes back into hiding. No fight, no bloodshed. Just proof that David had spared Saul's life.

David had his moment for revenge handed to him on a plate but he chose another way. He chose to spare the life of the man who was hunting him down. He pardoned his enemy. A moment of goodwill? A moment of grace?

As we approach Christmas, we look from David to One who is greater. After sparing Saul's life, David did go on to be a great military king. But at Christmas we look to a King who comes to us full of vulnerability. King Jesus doesn't just spare us or let us off with a warning, as if He were taking a corner of our cloak. He becomes one of us and pays the full price in His death so that we can have fullness of life.

The Revd Alice Cole, Assistant Curate, St James, Darwen & St Paul's, Hoddlesden

King Jesus doesn't just spare us or let us off with a warning, as if He were taking a corner of our cloak. He becomes one of us and pays the full price in His death so that we can have fullness of life.

WEEK 2 SUNDAY 5TH DECEMBER

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The vine – how can I make space for God?

READ: PSALM 132

'I will not enter my house or get into my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling-place for the Mighty One of Jacob.'

Psalm 132:3-5

I find the question 'How can I make space for God?' simple, but it doesn't mean it is easy. The ever-increasing busyness of life means that I can sometimes find myself getting to the end of a day realising I have barely allowed God into it! When reading Psalm 132, the verses above stood out to me. The author of this Psalm is saying how he will not go to bed until he has made space for God. So simple, yet a golden rule—God is the priority of his to-do-list for the day.

How do you make space for God? Do you sit down with your bible or book? Listen to a Christian Podcast? Go for a walk? Play a musical instrument, sing, dance, listen to music? Or meditate and pray by yourself? Maybe something else entirely. There is no one rule or mould for making space for God. It may look different for each of us. When you've identified how best to make space for God, how can you make it into a practice that sticks? You might need to create a new habit. In his book, *'Tiny Habits,'* Dr Fogg introduces the A.B.C model (Anchor, Behaviour, Celebrate):

Anchor : Use an existing habit to trigger a new habit. After I (existing habit) I will (new habit). **Behaviour** : Make the new behaviour you wish to start so tiny you require little to no motivation to do it, such as 1 minute of prayer, not more; 1 minute you can achieve without having to summon willpower. **Celebrate** : Creates immediate positive emotions, say something like—"I did a good job!" and feel yourself being successful, winning, happy!

When we celebrate, we create positive feelings in our mind and body that wires the new habit into our brain. The A.B.C model is beautifully simple. Creating a new habit is doable and it allows us to realise that automating a positive behaviour that supports our relationship with God is achievable.

So, try identifying an existing behaviour to Anchor a tiny new Behaviour to, something so tiny you just do it and then Celebrate yourself emotionally to embed the habit! God deserves our time, no matter how small the beginnings.

Alexandra Uffindell, Lay-member of Buckshaw Village Church

READ: 1 SAMUEL 25:1-44

'David said to Abigail, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today from blood-guilt and from avenging myself by my own hand!"' **1 Samuel 25:32-33**

Nothing gets the blood boiling like a game of Monopoly at Christmas. Or maybe Risk would be more appropriate as we think of the armies of the soon-to-be-King David. I still remember one particular game of Risk which I played with my school friends almost 20 years ago and my rage at the betrayal I faced at their hands still runs through me as I think about it today.

In this chapter, David was even more quick to temper than me it seems, but I suppose the stakes were much higher. A mighty snub by Nabal, after all that David had done for his men, sends David into a furious rage. I can imagine his teeth and fists clenched as he commands 400 men to strap on their swords and follow him to kill every male in Nabal's household. This revenge will not be served cold but at boiling point!

God knows that it is not good or right for David to exact the price of Nabal's rejection of the Lord's anointed: He would have the blood of many innocents on his hands and carry that guilt into his future kingship and this was not God's plan. Through her quick thinking and even quicker actions Abigail appears to be the saviour of the piece. But as incredible as she is she is not just acting off her own back but is immediately identified as an agent of God. By realising what God had done through the wise Abigail David was able to focus, not on his actions in seeking revenge, but on God's providence, God's power and God's plan.

This passage reminds me of one of the parables of Jesus I find most difficult to comprehend. It's the one where bad seed is spread amongst the good and the landowner does not let the workers pull it out. *"It will be sorted in the threshing at the end"* they say. These passages are not simply calls to inaction and idle waiting, but reminders that God sits on the throne, He is not idle and those who do wrong by Him will face the consequences of their actions.

I do pray that, in your visits and time with family and friends this Advent and Christmas, tensions will not raise to the level we have seen in the story of Nabal and David. But if you do ever find yourself wishing to avenge a wrong done to you, remember that God stopped David that day and for good reason. The only person acting for God in this story was a very wise woman bringing peace. May we too be agents of God, understanding that His providence is supreme and pray for the coming of the Prince of Peace.

The Revd Sam Cheesman, Chaplain to the Bishop of Blackburn

READ: 1 SAMUEL 28:1-2; 29:1-11*'For how could this fellow reconcile himself to his lord?' 1 Samuel 29:4*

So we find David, twenty years or so after killing the Philistine, Goliath, as a servant of Achish a Philistine general. He has fled from King Saul, and after having been a successful commander in Saul's army, he finds his refuge with his previous enemies. David has done all that he can so that he doesn't have to fight the Israelites. But, like putting off that thing we dread the most,

there are no more excuses that David can make. He is going to have to fight his own family and people. Just as all seems lost, the Philistine commanders turn him away from the impending battle. They dare not risk a Hebrew commander in their midst; they don't trust him.

Can we allow the Prince of Peace to still those fears and allow us to face up to them? Can we dare to believe that God might work even through those we dislike or fear the most? What do you need God's help with to face this Christmas?

As we continue to prepare for Christmas with food, decorations, cards, calendars, parties, and presents, perhaps many of us have some understanding of David's predicament. Whilst Christmas is a time for families and friends to come together, perhaps more so this year than ever given last Christmas, there is a truth that feels disloyal to the spirit of Christmas to admit. We find some members of our family and circle of friends really difficult to deal with. We use all the excuses that David does, including saying we have been to see them when we haven't, but that creeping fear that we are going to spend some of Christmas with them, just won't go away. Some of the biggest rows at Christmas can be about who is coming to stay, or who are we

going to visit, and for how long. Perhaps like David you too are unable to go home just now. Perhaps something is keeping you away. Jesus' family will soon also know the pain of fleeing and hiding.

David's fears are dispelled when he finally gives in. He is spared the pain and agony he is expecting. The true spirit of Christmas, the important preparations, are within our own hearts. Can we allow the Prince of Peace to still those fears and allow us to face up to them? Can we dare to believe that God might work even through those we dislike or fear the most? What do you need God's help with to face this Christmas?

The Revd Adam Thomas, Director of Whalley Abbey

READ: 1 SAMUEL 30:1-29

'But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.' **1 Samuel 30:6b**

In today's passage, David loses everything he owns and everyone he cares for. Has he not already lost enough? He is on the run for his life; he has been separated from his first wife and he has lost his best friend. What more can go wrong?

Returning to Ziklag, having been rejected by Achish and exhausted from three days travel, he finds it burnt to the ground and families abducted. The scene is so heart-breaking that David and his men weep until they had no strength left to weep.

Here we see the very human side of David. A tough warrior is reduced to tears of lament so strong that the tears run dry. In his weakness David turns to the Lord. With no human strength of his own left, both physically and emotionally exhausted, God provides David with enough strength to move forward.

David seeks God's guidance and, as a result, he has the courage to go and rescue his family. With a depleted army (200 were too exhausted to cross the brook), David meets an Egyptian who can help him find the raiders. David's mission is successful – he gets back everything that has been taken including flocks and herds. When he returns to the 200 exhausted men and must deal with resentment within the ranks, he reminds his men not to be selfish with "what the Lord has given us; he has preserved us and handed over to us the raiding party that attacked us." (v23).

*My grace is
sufficient for you,
for my power is
made perfect in
weakness.*

David's faith in God is personal. His trust is real and courageous based upon a God who strengthens, guides and provides. David is to be made King very soon. These events have taught him where his strength comes from – not from himself but from God. His experiences teach us that we can trust in the same God. In recent times, we have suffered many losses and our hearts have been broken by the circumstances we find ourselves in. Relying on God's strength and courageously seeking to do what he wants demonstrates the dynamic life of being a disciple. It is good to take time to acknowledge the daily miracles of grace when God gives us the strength we need to keep going. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9

Joy Rushton, Diocesan Being Witnesses Manager

READ: 2 SAMUEL 1:1-27

Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen!

2 Samuel 1:19

Way back in 1 Samuel 17 is the celebrated conflict with Goliath. One of the first reasons David gained the attention of his countrymen, and quickly won a place in their affections, was because of his high view of God and His people and his willingness to put his life on the line for both!

Yet we encounter a very different David in this passage: things were not panning out well – conflict, suspicion, violence and pillaging marred the fortunes of God's people, frustrating the very purposes of God for Israel. The news that Saul had died signalled the arrival of another dark cloud, but that Jonathan – dear Jonathan – had also died, that cut deep...“Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them; and all the men who were with him did the same. They mourned and wept, and fasted...”. 2 Samuel 1:11.

David's response? He writes a song! But not just any old ditty, he composes a lament, verse 17: “David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan..” it was then written down for posterity in The Book of Jashar.

David seemed to grasp the significance of lamentation; there are moments in life when our hopes and dreams are dashed, frustrated or even destroyed. Perhaps conflict, sickness, pandemic or even sinfulness are the cause – but we feel the loss, deeply. Later David's son Solomon would write, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12).

At such times the risk of lapsing into bitterness can be significant. The writer to the Hebrews warns us, “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (Hebrews 12:15).

David's response can teach us that lamenting the loss of something good can serve the needs of the heart, because in the lamentation is an affirmation of a good that, when lost, is worth acknowledging, and there are feelings of diminishment that need to be expressed for a season. But in that acknowledgement may there also be a renewal of vision and the motivation to strive for it anew?

David's ability to lament well, combined with his faith in God's purposes, meant he avoided the devastating power of bitterness and lived to see much brighter days.

The Revd Chris Casey, St John the Divine, Cliviger, & St John Evangelist, Worsthorne

READ: 2 SAMUEL 2:1-3:1

'David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?" The Lord said to him, "Go up." David said, "To which shall I go up?" He said, "To Hebron." So David went up there, along with his two wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel, and Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel.' **2 Samuel 2:1-2**

If the story of David were made into a film it would be an incredible action-filled adventure movie, full of narrow escapes and dramatic plot twists! At the beginning of today's passage David inquired of the Lord whether to head up to Judah, after he learns of Saul's death in the war between the Philistines and Israelites. It instantly reminded me of the words from Psalm 32:8 which says, "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you." Despite his many faults and failures we often find David 'inquiring of the Lord'. Whenever he faced difficulty or uncertainty he would consult with God for direction. In 1 Samuel 16: 12-13, David had already been anointed king over Israel but he would not take a step toward claiming his throne without consulting the Lord, and so God promptly answered, "Go up ... to Hebron" where he was anointed king of Judah.

David's multiple inquiries of the Lord provide us with a great model for our relationship with God and, just as He faithfully responds to David, God won't turn a deaf ear to us when we seek His guidance and pursue His purpose for our lives. As Christians, although we know that we should pray and ask for God's direction, we sometimes fall into the trap of becoming distracted by the many worldly resources that are available to lean on when it comes to making decisions. So ask yourself the question, do you need to inquire of God? God knows our dilemmas, He has compassion for our problems and is always available – if we will just inquire. But how do we do this today? In order to understand God's plan for us we can start by reading and understanding His teachings in the Bible, listening to the Holy Spirit when we pray (remembering to wait for a response as well as doing the talking!) and by taking advice from trusted Christian friends. We don't need to second guess ourselves as God wants us to get it right so that we can trust the things He puts in place to lead us down the right path.

As we journey through Advent may we desire to follow David's example – not seeking God's blessing on our own plans, but pursuing God's will for our lives through a habit of inquiring of the Lord and waiting for His answer. The closer we walk with God, the more aligned we are with His will so we can use our lives to truly honour Him... which in return brings about an abundance of blessings.

Sarah Earnshaw, Diocesan Children's Work Adviser

READ: 2 SAMUEL 5:1-16

'David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inwards. And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.' **2 Samuel 5:9-10**

If you were to make a film of the capture of Jerusalem then a brave Israelite called Joab leading a gang in crawling through narrow tunnels and shinning up the 'water pipe' into the city would be a dramatic moment to include. The ancient city of Jerusalem was naturally very well defended – which explains why it was still in the hands of the Jebusites until the time of David. So secure that its inhabitants taunted that even the lame and blind could defend it. How then to break into the city? Make use of the cracks, tunnels and natural 'chimneys' through the limestone rocks underneath. Springing a surprise on the inhabitants, it would then be possible for David to take the city and make it his own.

Repeatedly, we have seen that God was with David, His anointed servant. Again, that proves to be true as Jerusalem is taken and becomes the capital city. Like Washington DC it makes an ideal capital because it doesn't belong to any one tribe. Long centuries after the children of Israel had first come to the promised land they are becoming what we might recognise as a country with territory, a people, a king (now recognised by all 12 tribes) and a capital city. God's promises are being fulfilled.

Jerusalem was chosen to be a capital that could be embraced by all the tribes of Israel. But there is something that jars with us as we read today's extract. We can maybe understand, if not condone, how David responds to the barb that even the lame and blind could defend Jerusalem by instructing his advance guard to attack them. But how about the writer's comment that this became the origin of the saying "*the blind and the lame shall not come into the house*" (i.e. the Temple)? Hasty words responsible in part at least for a legacy of exclusion. Not for the first or last time we are reminded that David, though God's anointed, was fallible – and that his hasty words and sinful actions had lasting consequences.

Wind on another thousand years or so and Great David's Greater Son came from to the great city of Jerusalem as God's anointed king. He entered the temple at the heart of the city, drove out those who were making it a den of robbers, and guess what? "*The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.*"

The Revd Toby Webber, Vicar of Altham with Clayton-le-Moors

WEEK 3 SUNDAY 12TH DECEMBER

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The vine – how can I keep growing as a Christian?

READ: PSALM 51

'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit.' **Psalm 51:10, 12**

This Psalm, attributed to David, is one I find sustaining and encouraging. Singled out by God and favoured in so many ways, yet he succumbs and, in his lust for Bathsheba and the adultery and murder which follow, he breaks three of God's commandments. He could have given up then and there declared himself a total failure, completely lost and hopeless but he doesn't. He comes to God broken, vulnerable, and humble. He knows there is nothing he can do or say, no sacrifice he can offer, to excuse what he has done. All he brings is the sin for which he needs forgiveness. That is exactly what God wants from him because, given true repentance, God can begin the restorative process.

In my younger days I did a lot of orienteering and compass marches. At times I got lost and faced a choice. I could give up, slink back, and never attempt anything again, or I could get my bearings, reorientate my map and find my way, or, if I was really lost, I could ask for help. The former condemns us to wallowing in shame and failure, we convince ourselves we've blown it for ever and there is no point trying anymore. The latter is how we grow – we learn about ourselves; we learn how to do better next time; we learn humility; we learn about the endless capacity of God to help us back on the right path. There used to be a saying 'You live and learn', I think the modern version is 'Every day's a school day', whichever you prefer, they are so true of life in general and of our faith life especially. We may want to give up on ourselves, but God will never give up on us. He knows we are weak and stumble, but He created us for what we will become, not what we were or even what we are. I think it was Augustine that spoke of us all as 'becoming Christians'.

So, for me, this psalm, often seen as focusing on guilt and misery, is a psalm with so much promise, hope, and joy. Yes, there is true remorse and a plea for forgiveness but above all this psalm is a request for help to learn and grow. So as you pause and pray this morning, you might like to read again those verses quoted above, and ask God to give you a fresh start this Advent.

The Revd Andy Shaw, Vicar of Over Wyre

READ: 2 SAMUEL 6:1-23

'David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.' **2 Samuel 6:14-15**

Have you ever had to move something very valuable? Carefully rotating it round a corner so not to scratch the wall or damage your possession. In 2 Samuel 6, David is not just moving his most treasured family heirloom, he is bringing to Jerusalem the ark of God, the dwelling place of God on earth with the Israelites.

David and his men put the ark on a cart pulled by oxen, and when one of the oxen wobbled, Uzzah reached out to steady the ark and touched it. Now, the Israelites were commanded in the book of Numbers to carry the ark rather than put it on a cart and not to touch it, but here they go against God's commands and so Uzzah is killed. God's holy dwelling place had been touched and His commands have been ignored. David becomes both angry and afraid of God. Rather than just being a God who delivers His enemies into his hands, David sees God's holiness and power differently. He is afraid of God because he realises the power that God has and the reverence He deserves.

But a few verses on, we see David dancing before God, and Michal telling him off for dancing like a "vulgar fellow". What has changed from David's fear and unwillingness to continue to bring the ark to Jerusalem to him dancing and shouting?

David's change in perspective seems to be triggered by him learning of the blessing the ark can have. After David was unwilling to take the ark any further after Uzzah was killed it was looked after by Obed-edom. David realised that although God is holy and His presence in the ark must be respected, God's presence brings blessing. David's anger turns to dancing, his fear turns to worship as he sees that the awesome power of God brings blessing.

This passage calls us to sharpen our view of God. He is both holy and awesome, but not someone to be scared of. God's presence blesses people and is worthy of celebration. As we come to celebrate when God's presence came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, when God could be touched, are we both in awe and celebrating the blessing He brings? Does our worship and prayer reflect both God's incredible power and our overflowing celebration?

The Revd Amy Bland, Assistant Curate, Euxton Parish Church

READ: 2 SAMUEL 7:1-29

'When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.'

2 Samuel 7:12-13

As we reach the end of an unsettled year, with many a twist and turn, most of us will be hoping that 2022 will bring a little more certainty, will feel a little more secure. It would be nice to plan a holiday knowing we will be able to travel; it would be good to study knowing there will be an exam to sit.

At the beginning of today's reading David is settling down after many years of turbulence and unrest. So, to match this mood of permanence and security, he proposes that now would be a good time to make the Lord's dwelling place more solid. It was time to dispense with the tent, the tabernacle, and to put down roots.

Yet through the prophet Nathan, the Lord reminds David that the tabernacle was deliberately mobile. Their security wasn't to come from a permanent place but from God's permanent presence. Wherever you have been, "I have been with you", says the Lord (v.9).

And so the Lord looks to the future and promises David that the peace, security and rest of God's people would not come from a house of bricks and mortar that David built for God, but from a house of flesh and blood that God would build for David. This family line, this royal dynasty, would be a house that would never end (v.13), which sin could not destroy (v.14), from which the Lord would never take His love (v.15), and on which His people could rely (v.16).

During Advent we remember that Jesus was born into the line of David. That as Isaiah would prophecy, "He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with righteousness from that time on and for ever" (Isaiah 9:7).

However great our desire for stability, the New Year will bring with it new uncertainties. We can be drawn towards the familiar and shy away from the unknown. Anxiety is stirred at the thought of introducing a new way of serving into our established routine, for example, or an additional outlay on top of our planned giving. Yet the Christian knows that our security is found not in creating a settled life into which we can make a neat place for God where He will not move, but in placing our trust in Jesus our king. It is His eternal reign that provides our security, wherever this next year may take us.

The Revd David Whitehouse, Vicar of St Andrew's, Leyland

READ: 2 SAMUEL 9:1-13

'David said to him, 'Do not be afraid, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan; I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you yourself shall eat at my table always.' **2 Samuel 9:7**

The passage before us today reintroduces us to Mephibosheth who is Jonathan's son. We last heard of him in 2 Samuel 4:4 when his nurse had scooped him up to take him into hiding when she had heard of the death of King Saul, his grandfather, and Jonathan, his father. Mephibosheth was in mortal danger as a new king would seek to kill anyone with the potential to claim the throne. Even at five years old he was in danger. To add to the tragic situation for this child, whilst running away he fell and became lame in both feet as a result – something that was a difficulty for the rest of his life.

We fast forward to the passage here and Mephibosheth is still in hiding for his life and hoping that the new king, David, would not find and kill him. He is living in poverty and fear in the house of another person instead of having the land and privilege that the next in line to the throne would ordinarily have. David, conversely, had become more and more powerful as the king of Israel over that time and discovers the whereabouts of Mephibosheth and sends for him. Mephibosheth must have assumed he was about to be killed along with any family he had.

However, David is no ordinary King and seeks to restore relationships, status, money and position. He models a behaviour and an action that is unbelievable to many, by giving him land and elevating him to the highest position at the king's table.

David in the passage before us sets out a model of how we should be, as followers of Christ, in our relationship with others. We are encouraged to seek out those with whom we have broken relationships or those in fear and attempt to restore our relationship with them. Moreover, we are given a picture of how God seeks to bring us out of fear and hiding and restore us into a right relationship with Him, ultimately at his table; a vivid picture of God's saving grace.

As you read and reflect on this passage take time to consider any broken and damaged relationships you have and ask for God to work in you through His Spirit to build and restore them.

Canon Stephen Whittaker, Diocesan Director of Education

READ: 2 SAMUEL 11:1-27

'But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.' **2 Samuel 11:27**

If you have ever taken all the dominoes out of a box, stood them on end in a line and then pushed the first one over to create a chain of toppling dominoes, you will know that small actions can have big consequences.

In this passage, David, the hero who could seemingly do no wrong, surprises us by his actions. We are told that, at the time when kings usually went off to war, rather than accompanying his army, David stayed at home. Although we are not told why, we see that this departure from his usual routine led to a whole series of unexpected events that would impact the rest of his life and that of generations to come.

Whilst strolling on the roof, which was probably a pleasant place to be, especially when he should have been at war, David spotted Bathsheba. Sadly, we hear of many instances of well-known or influential people committing adultery. Despite their wealth and material possessions they have desired something they can only obtain by taking something which should be off-limits, and perhaps in this instance, when the King sent his messengers to bring Bathsheba to him, she had no choice but to obey.

Once David heard that Bathsheba was pregnant, he tried to 'fix' the situation, firstly by arranging for her husband to return so that the child would hopefully be assumed to be his, and then, when that plan failed, he arranged things so that ultimately Bathsheba became a widow and could then become his wife. The passage focuses on David and his various actions. We read nothing of Bathsheba's thoughts about David, but see that she mourned for her husband after his death.

As we travel through Advent, what actions do we take that might have unintended consequences? Though David did not remain at home with the intention of taking Bathsheba and murdering her husband, throughout the chapter he appears to have acted without any regard for God, and it seems the more actions he took, the further away from God he moved. Each day we make decisions and plans, some seemingly insignificant. As we spend time reflecting during this season, let's bring all our decisions and actions, however small, to God, asking Him to guide us so that they work for the coming of His kingdom.

Stephanie Rankin, Diocesan Stewardship Resourcing Officer

READ: 2 SAMUEL 12:1-25

'[David said] 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!.' **2 Samuel 12:5b-7a**

David, by this stage of the story, has been blessed with high status and authority. Over the course of recent events he's come to learn a lot about God. He's good at battles; he's highly respected as the defender of Israel against its pagan enemies. Everyone knows that he's been anointed by the Lord as their king. His charisma oozes out and both friends and enemies take note. All is going well, it seems.

But for all the weight of his responsibilities and achievements, something vital in his own story has gone missing (or maybe, so far, it's never been addressed) – there's something not right in the holy, hidden place of his own heart. There's a lost connection between what David knows and trusts with his head, and his own quiet integrity before God. Pre-occupied with things on a macro-scale he's forgotten his need for humility and repentance for himself.

So when David feels lust for Bathsheba he's not pricked by his own conscience. It apparently doesn't seem to occur to him that by taking her, and then arranging for her husband to be conveniently disposed of, he might be guilty of sin. He trespasses on holy ground with all the ignorance of someone who simply hasn't made the link between his great authority as king and himself as a mortal human being who will one day give answer for his actions to his Maker.

The chapter we are reading today tells the story of how David learns what he lacks, though the birth and death of his baby son. It is moving and intensely painful to read. David's heart breaks and he falls contrite. When it is over he is able to understand what's he's done from a new perspective.

But we notice, too, that he's left not with the lingering, paralysing bitterness that sometimes poisons people's futures after such intense loss, but rather with the sense of something healed and made new. The past is the past and he cannot undo what is done. But his penitence for it is specific and utterly without evasion; not "Oops, I messed up" or "I ought to do better" – which wouldn't have cost him much to say – but something far more profound, cast in fasting and prayer, which God can meet. Having owned his sin and been sorry David is now able to own the fact that God goes on loving him no less than before.

Maybe this story can help to remind us that our real lives are the places where the living Christ comes to meet us, in our sin and with our broken hearts. I am indeed one who has sinned. But I am also one whom He longs to forgive and to love afresh into new life. The same, of course, is also true for you.

The Revd Stephen Brown, Vicar of St Peter's, Laneside

READ: 2 SAMUEL 15:1-37

'Then the king said to Zadok, 'Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it remains. But if he says, "I take no pleasure in you", here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him.' **2 Samuel 15:25-26**

The psalms or "Zaboors" (in Urdu language) of David are an important spiritual source for Pakistani Christians from a Punjabi linguistic background. David wrote several psalms, including 3, 39, 41, 55, 61 and 63 during the days of Absalom's rebellion as we have read in 2 Samuel 15:1-37.

There are several parallels between Jesus' and David's experience in this reading. However, though Jesus comes from the root of Jesse as humble Son of God, Jesus never depreciated His divine nature and power in human living. Let us learn how David dealt with this difficult situation in his life.

Experience of betrayal: David's own son betrayed him. We read about Jesus being betrayed by one of the important disciples Peter, who was to become the rock of the Church. We can think of the time in our own life when we feel betrayed by someone very close to us. In the political realm people like Absalom through their crafty nature can fool other people to embrace them.

Experience of becoming minority: David who ruled the Kingdom suddenly became a minority in the face of Absalom. It is a painful experience of loss of identity.

Experience of humiliation: David had some good support from priests and Levites and some non-Israelites. But he did not allow his pride and anger to control him. He possibly would have defeated Absalom, but it turned out to be a national rebellion and war would have caused major bloodshed of innocent people. David chose to escape with an army of about 10,000.

In verses 25 and 26 we learn that David chose to leave everything in the hands of God. Let the Lord, if it pleases Him, bring me back to power. There are dark times and difficult times in our lives and like David and Jesus we must learn to surrender our lives and our future to God's will.

*There are dark times
and difficult times
in our lives and like
David and Jesus
we must learn to
surrender our lives
and our future to
God's will.*

The Revd Sarah Gill, Vicar of United Benefice of St Stephens with St. James Church, Blackburn

WEEK 4 SUNDAY 19TH DECEMBER

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The vine – How can I show the hope and joy of Jesus Christ to the world?

READ: PSALM 21

‘He asked you for life; you gave it to him [...] You bestow on him blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence.’ Psalm 21:4,6

“Safe in the market-place because at home in the desert.” So wrote the late Basil Hume OSB. In that brief phrase is summed up the indivisible relationship between a life of prayer and an active life in the world. Rooting our lives in this relationship we shape the answer to the third question set by The Vine: “How can I show the hope and joy of Jesus Christ in the world?”

In prayer, the life of God flows through the secret place of our heart as the sap flows unseen through the vine and its branches. Just as the fruit covering the vine both reflects the health of its branches and then offers that health to the world, so too we reflect both our closeness to God in our hearts and the goodness we hold for the well-being of others.

Psalm 21 offers a contrast of hearts. The traditional understanding of power and glory is expressed through the swallowing up and destruction of enemies in wrath. But as we read this in the context of Advent, we approach it through the revealing of a deeper heart: that of God preparing to come into the world with the tender compassion from on high and with light to guide the world into the ways of peace.

In that solitary space that we make for God, the Lord begins his work of re-creating our hearts in His own image and likeness. Then beyond ourselves – in our communities – we touch situations, circumstances and people we meet with understanding, compassion and peace. We learn, not without struggle, that the fire that blazes within us against those who cross us, or events that frustrate us, in the end only consumes ourselves.

For reflection: Firstly, Verse 4: “He asked you for life; you gave it to him.” Look and listen to the cry for life that is heard all around us; then listen to your heart to discover the measure to which you can answer that cry through the grace you have been given. Secondly, Verse 6: “You bestow on him blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence.” Understand that, whatever we think of ourselves, we are God’s blessing to the world; and the touch of our lives on the lives of others will be the touch of joy, because it is imbued with the compassion of God who lives in our hearts.

John Wilson, Lay-member of Blackburn Cathedral

READ: 2 SAMUEL 19:9-23

‘And say to Amasa, “Are you not my bone and my flesh? So may God do to me, and more, if you are not the commander of my army from now on, in place of Joab.” Amasa swayed the hearts of all the people of Judah as one, and they sent word to the king, “Return, both you and all your servants.”’ 2 Samuel 19:13-14

I am by nature an emotional person: my heart is swayed by news on the television, tragic stories, finishing a gripping book and personal bereavements. Therefore I have a lot of sympathy with King David. Since we were last in the story, news has reached him that Absalom, his son who led a revolt against him, has been killed. David weeps and cries, mourning the loss of his son (18:33f).

But, as a result of Absalom's death, a power vacuum has emerged. Should David return to Jerusalem to be king? Would the hearts of the people return to him? Can David overcome his personal hurt at the rejection by the people and become their leader again? David is clear that he will not return to Jerusalem until everyone wants him to be there and so he sends Zadok and Abiathar to do some reconciliation work, to persuade people to accept David back. David wants their hearts to be swayed back to him.

David, as we have seen, is a complex character, he makes mistakes like we all do but he always seeks God's heart. His seeking of God's heart over many years means that he is open to the emotions that come to him, but they do not overwhelm and dictate to him. He can be swayed by God's heart. He can grieve and mourn. He can encourage and lead his troops. He can strive for unity and loyalty. He can return to where he once was king and take over again – he won't let hurt and rejection remain or eclipse what might be ahead of him.

Alongside all of that he demonstrates kindness, mercy and compassion with a helping of shrewdness. He appoints Amasa (captain of Absalom's army) as the leader of his army, a gesture of reconciliation to help unite the kingdom. Upon his return to Jerusalem, he spares the life of Shimei who has sinned against him and he goes on later in the chapter to show kindness to Mephibosheth.

Can I this Advent season put aside my previous hurts and rejections to allow God to speak through me and use me to show kindness, mercy and compassion to those around me? Will my heart be swayed to love and worship Christ as King in my life?

Father God may my heart always be swayed by Your love for me.

May my words and actions reflect and demonstrate Your love in my heart. Amen.

The Revd Hannah Boyd, Vicar of All Saints, Higher Walton & Holy Trinity, Hoghton

READ: 2 SAMUEL 22:1-51

'The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer [...] He is a tower of salvation for his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his descendants for ever.'

2 Samuel 22, 51

Yesterday's reading ended with David showing mercy to Shimei, someone who had behaved very badly towards him. Today David sings a wonderful song of thanksgiving to God for delivering him from the hands of all his enemies. Praising God comes more easily when we are acting with grace and mercy to others.

Singing praises to God happens a lot at this season, as we love to join in familiar carols. Carol-singing is all the more special this year, as we had to miss out on singing (indoors at least) last year due to the pandemic. Like many carols this song rejoices that God's way is perfect and God keeps his promises (v31).

Although this song appears just before David's last words (23:1-7) there is a certain brashness about this song, a confidence in himself and in his relationship with God (vv21-31) that suggests this was written earlier, before the events surrounding David's adultery with Bathsheba which so overshadowed his later life. This song is also found, with minor variations, as Psalm 18.

The song begins and ends with the powerful image of God as a strong rock (vv2,3,32,47). This image is also used by Hannah in her song of praise at the beginning of the books of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:2), and so this image of God as a steadfast rock enfolds all the stories of human struggle and failure in between.

The song ends by praising God for His love for His anointed king, and for David's descendants in the future, who of course will include Jesus (the title Christ means 'anointed'), who is 'great David's greater Son'. Praise be to God our rock, who reveals himself in a rock-hewn cave in Bethlehem.

The experience of Covid has shaken many of us and made us more fearful, and the image of a solid rock or refuge is an appealing one in an increasingly unstable world. Whatever may be on our mind today, let us focus on our unshakeable God, our strong tower of refuge, and bring Him our thanksgiving. And, like David, may we act with mercy and grace to any who cause us grief today, so that nothing hinders our praise.

The Venerable Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn

READ: 2 SAMUEL 23:1-7

'Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favourite of the Strong One of Israel.' **2 Samuel 23:1**

"It is finished." Certainly, for the Christian the most evocative final words spoken. Jesus proclaims from the Cross the end of His earthly ministry and the part of His death in God's plan of salvation. Indeed, they are not just the most evocative words for Christians but the whole of creation as God's salvation is there for all of us.

If they are the most significant final words in human history then certainly the final words of David as recorded today are rather special too. From inauspicious beginnings as a small shepherd boy he has emerged as the greatest figure amongst the kings in Israel's history. If there were more godly leaders then David is certainly the one that leaves the most significant legacy. From his line Jesus is born to fulfil the messianic promise. Special final words too as David gives honour to the God who has raised him up. Not only was David from humble beginnings but his actions were always a mixture of great leader and frail man, not least the manslaughter of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, sent to the frontline of battle due to David's lust for Bathsheba. From that incident he knows the death of a child. Yes, as David leaves his legacy, he reminds us of all that God has done through him. David acknowledges that God's Spirit speaks through him and gives him the capacity to serve the people as a righteous ruler, despite those inauspicious beginnings, and gives an everlasting legacy, so important to Jewish people to this day and for Christians as Jesus "was born of David's line".

Yes, like David we are frail and do not always make the right decisions. Yet we too are called to righteousness.

At this time of year this might lead us to think about our own legacy. The chances are our final words will not be recorded but what will we leave behind? Just a few days before we celebrate the birth of Christ we think of the gifts that we will give and receive this Christmas – a lovely tradition and a sign of our care and concern for one another. However, far more significantly, what will we leave behind? Yes, like David we are frail and do not always make the right decisions. Yet we too are called to righteousness. Christians through their baptismal inheritance are temples of the Holy Spirit. So, what will be the legacy that we leave behind as, so to speak, our final words?

The Venerable David Picken, Archdeacon of Lancaster

READ: 2 SAMUEL 24:1-25

'When David saw the angel who was destroying the people he said to the Lord, "I alone have sinned, and I alone have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house.' **2 Samuel 24:17**

On March 2nd 2021 I filled in my census form. That national census is taken every ten years and it is an essential tool of government, allowing for decisions to be made in areas such as education, housing and health. Whilst people have formed endless theories to explain the pandemic, I have never seen anyone argue that it is God's punishment for counting the people.

So what did David do so wrong? Why was God's anger kindled against him for sending out Joab and his men to conduct something as commonplace as a census? Whatever the mistake, it was a terrible one and resulted in the death of 70,000 through the pestilence that followed.

The answer is found in Exodus 30:12 where God tells Moses that if he wishes to conduct a census, everybody registered should give a ransom for their lives. Why? Because Israel does not belong to any prophet, ruler, judge or monarch. Israel belongs only to God. To presume to count the people of Israel, as David did, implies ownership of them. It is taking to oneself the gifts of God.

In that respect David's crime is a very modern one because it is all too easy to assume that God's gifts are our own private possessions. We do that when we plunder creation, despoiling it and destroying it to satisfy our greed. We do it when we take for granted or abuse the people in our lives, assuming they are ours and not God's. We do it when we store up money and possessions and fail to give and share. In all these ways, and so many others, we forget God and put ourselves in his place, something we usually call sin, which leads to death.

So David's sin brings punishment on his nation and in despair he prays, *"Let your hand be against me and against my father's house"*. On Christmas Day, David's prayer is answered. Because a thousand years later there was another census, one commanded this time by an oppressive Roman regime. And this census brought Joseph to Bethlehem where his new wife, Mary, would give birth to Jesus, the One whose very name means 'he saves.' For this child, born of David's line, would take sin and death upon his own shoulders and set us free.

Our journey through the story of David has led us finally to the Temple, the place of sacrifice. Likewise our journey through Advent brings us to Jesus who is the new Temple, the One whose sacrifice will set us sinners free for all eternity. So let us rejoice that the one who saves is with us.

The Rt Revd Philip North, Bishop of Burnley

READ: PSALM 70

'Let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. Let those who love your salvation say evermore, 'God is great!' **Psalm 70: 4**

The life of David we've been studying during this Advent all points to his descendant, Jesus Christ, and on this Christmas Eve we find ourselves on the brink of another celebration of that remarkable birth, by which God chooses to enter the world He has created by becoming a tiny and vulnerable child, exposed to all the dangers of human life.

The words of the short Psalm 70, a copy of part of Psalm 40, verses 13-17, can be read in a number of ways, firstly as a prayer of King David, secondly as a prayer of Jesus his descendant and thirdly as a prayer of the Christian disciple.

Primarily it is a prayer for action and intervention by God and for Him to make haste or hurry up. The waiting for salvation and redemption has been going on too long, the enemies of God have been causing ongoing hurt and ridicule for too long and the poor and needy have been suffering for too long. So the Book of Common Prayer uses the first verse as one of its responses:

O God make speed to save us

O Lord make haste to help us

That prayer had significant urgency before the incarnation, longing for the arrival of the Messiah. When we pray it today on our side of the incarnation, we long no more for a first coming but for the day of His return, when all the enemies of God will indeed be put to shame and God's salvation plan will be fully realised with final and full deliverance.

In the meantime our prayer is for God's urgent intervention into the present, to stand against all that opposes His will, to protect the cause of freedom to believe, to create justice, mercy and hope for all, to build communities of peace, to promote a safe place for Christian faith and to see God's Kingdom come and His will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. The Psalm anticipates the plea at the end of Revelation, in response to Jesus' thrice repeated promise, "I am coming soon: Amen, come Lord Jesus". (Revelation 22).

Psalm 70 is a challenge for our praying to be more urgent. On Christmas Eve, as we rejoice in the salvation to be found in Jesus Christ, so we should be praying like the Psalmist for God to make haste and not delay in bringing in His Kingdom and rule in all its fullness in human affairs.

The Rt Revd Julian Henderson, Bishop of Blackburn

READ: PSALM 72

'Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.' **Psalm 72:19**

We've arrived! If advent is about "the arrival", then surely reaching Christmas Day means we've arrived? Or have we?

At the root of many of our Christmas Day stresses, are those unwelcome reminders that we haven't yet arrived at the perfect day of the rose-tinted TV adverts. Presents can be disappointing, turkeys aren't defrosted on time, relationships are frayed, loved ones are bone-achingly absent – but never forgotten.

Psalm 72 is a great place to end our advent devotions: "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended" (v 20). It wonderfully sums up the "now and not yet" of David as the type of the ideal king to come. The king who brings God's justice and righteousness (v 1-7), God's dominion (v 8-11), God's deliverance (v 4, 12-14), God's blessing on the land (v 16). The heart-felt hopes for this kingship stretch into the distant horizon: "May all nations be blessed in him" (v 17).

On Christmas Day, we glimpse of the distant horizon of the heavenly rule of Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 19.16), come to us as a tiny baby, the Word made flesh, the One who makes himself "known to [us] in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24.35). We live in the tension that we haven't yet reached the end when Jesus comes again and "his glory fills the whole earth" (v 19). But we glimpse it.

In the pressure cooker of today, as we lean into God's heart with the Psalmist, can you pause to lift your eyes to His Majesty in heaven, to catch a glimpse of His glory? Out the corner of your eye. A trailer of the 3D blockbuster movie which is to come.

We have not arrived; but we are arriving. And there are no expiry dates on God's promises. In the words of The Vision poem which appeared as graffiti on the wall in a 24-7 Prayer Room:

"And this vision will be. It will come to pass; it will come easily; it will come soon. How do I know? Because this is the longing of creation itself, the groaning of the Spirit, the very dream of God. My tomorrow is his today. My distant hope is his 3D. And my feeble, whispered, faithless prayer invokes a thunderous, resounding, bone-shaking great Amen! from countless angels, from heroes of the faith, from Christ himself. And He is the original dreamer, the ultimate winner. Guaranteed."

The Rt Revd Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster

WHAT'S NEXT?

We really hope you've enjoyed walking through Advent with this booklet. If you're wondering how you can continue with this pattern of daily reading there are a whole host of resources available to you. For ease of access, many resources are now available either online or as apps. A few suggestions are:

DAILY PRAYER

www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer Daily Prayer is available free as an app or on the Church of England Website and gives complete services for Morning, Evening and Night Prayer in both contemporary (Common Worship) and traditional (Book of Common Prayer) forms.

LECTIO 365

www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional Lectio 365 is a devotional resource that helps you pray the Bible every day, and is inspired by Lectio Divina – a method of Bible meditation that's been used by Christians for centuries. Written by leaders from the 24-7 Prayer movement, and produced in partnership with CWR, this resource helps you engage with Scripture to inspire prayer.

BIOY

www.bibleinoneyear.org With BIOY each day you receive a Psalm or Proverbs reading, a New Testament and an Old Testament reading. It also provides daily audio and written commentary to walk you through each day's reading, to provide fresh understanding of the texts.

THE VINE

The Vine will be launched in early spring 2022 at a number of different events aimed at different age groups. The main launch event is planned as part of the Festival of Faith in Everyday Life at Blackburn Cathedral on Saturday 19th March 2022. Save the date!

BIBLE PODLETS

www.bdeducation.org.uk/podcasts/bible-podlets Bible Podlets is a Bible study and discussion podcast for primary aged children to do with adults. Each episode has fun games/activities, an engaging Bible reading in the form of a news story, and discussion, with places to pause and talk together about the topic. You can download discussion notes from the resources area of the site. If you prefer a hard copy resource, Christian bookshops carry a large range of Bible reading material, from daily reading notes to study books on particular themes or books of the Bible.

In addition to these resources there will be regular Quiet Days and Retreats offered by Whalley Abbey: www.whalleyabbey.org



All texts in this booklet are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

Designed by Morse-Brown Design