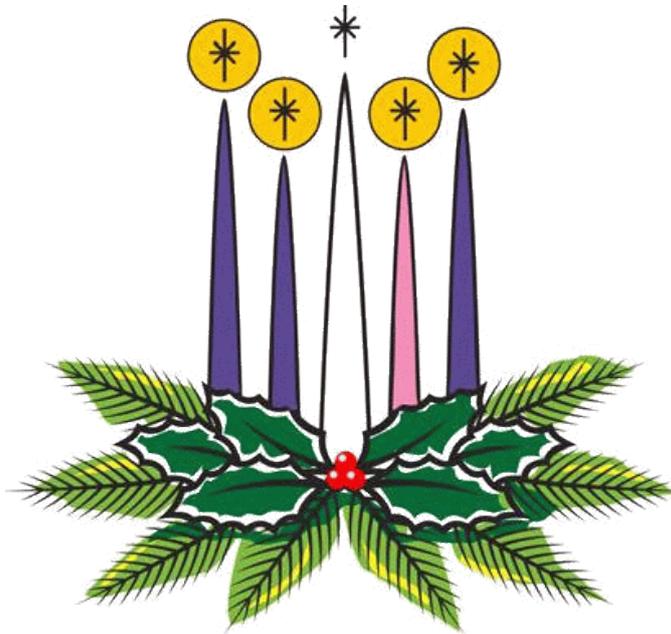


Fourth Sunday of Advent, Sunday, 20th December 2020



Dear Friends,

'And Mary said, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.' (Luke 1: 38)

This Sunday, we light the Fourth Candle of Advent, the Candle of Joy. When the angel Gabriel told Mary that a special child would be born to her she was filled with joy. She sang a song, known to us as *The Magnificat*, which begins with the words: *'My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'* Just as the birth of Jesus gave great joy to His mother, so His presence in the world brings joy to those who had none before. Throughout the Gospels, we hear how Jesus healed the sick and the destitute and gave them hope and peace when they believed in Him.

From hope, peace, and love through Jesus grows joy. Joy is like a light shining in a dark place. Today, we celebrate the joy we find in Jesus Christ.

Prayer for the Fourth Sunday of Advent – The Candle of Joy

Thank you God for the joy you give us.
We ask that as we wait for all your promises to come true,
and for Christ to come again,
that you would remain present with us.
Help us today, and every day to worship you,
to hear your word, and to do your will
by sharing your joy with each other.
We ask it in the name of the one who was born in Bethlehem.
Amen.



'Mothers and Children' by George Elgar Hicks

Earlier this week, I heard two mothers, one from County Durham and the other from Beckenham in Kent, being interviewed about how they were feeling in the build-up to Christmas during this time of Coronavirus. The conversation went something like this:

Mother 1: My kids are past the 'toys' stage. I'm shopping for an iPod for my son, and football boots, which I can't find anywhere. So yes, there are shortages this year!

Mother 2: I've got Teens and a 10 year old, and I'm feeling anxious about whether I can get what they are asking for. I don't feel I want to browse in shops this year. Instead I'm panic buying. I feel one of the reasons to go into shops at Christmas is to get some of the Christmas spirit.

Mother 1: Yes, I wonder if our children have that same sense of it being different. I am struggling to get into the spirit of spending!

Mother 2: I know what you mean. It's like we are having to focus on bigger things. We want our Mother-in-Law to stay - otherwise she will be on her own, but we're having to think about that. My kids are more concerned about that than presents. That's what the spirit of Christmas is: it's not about presents, it's about board games, and having a couple of glasses of champagne and making everyone laugh and enjoy Christmas for what it is.



'The Visitation' by Mariotto Albertinelli

I wonder what Mary would have made of these two mothers' conversation? I suspect she might have been a little bewildered. For the focus of Mary's innocent and pure life, up to and including the point that she was visited by the angel Gabriel and told she was about to conceive the Christ who would bring salvation to the world, was on being obedient before God. Though I imagine she would have responded outwardly with grace to our contemporary mothers, I doubt that Mary would have been able to conceptualise such a material conversation as theirs.

On Mary's behalf, I found myself despairing at the worldly focus of the two mothers' understanding of the spirit of Christmas. The line '*I am struggling to get into the spirit of spending!*' had me fair gagging. Their mutual agreement that Christmas was about drinking champagne and having a good time, with no cognisance as to the celebration of Christmas being entirely about the birth of Christ, largely confirms the secular perception of Christmas as being an excuse to party in the depths of winter.

All the more reason for us to stay true to our part in the unfolding story of Advent, as we watch and wait and hope for the birth of Jesus – once again giving us a new imperative to spread the good news of God reaching out to our world and bringing us home.

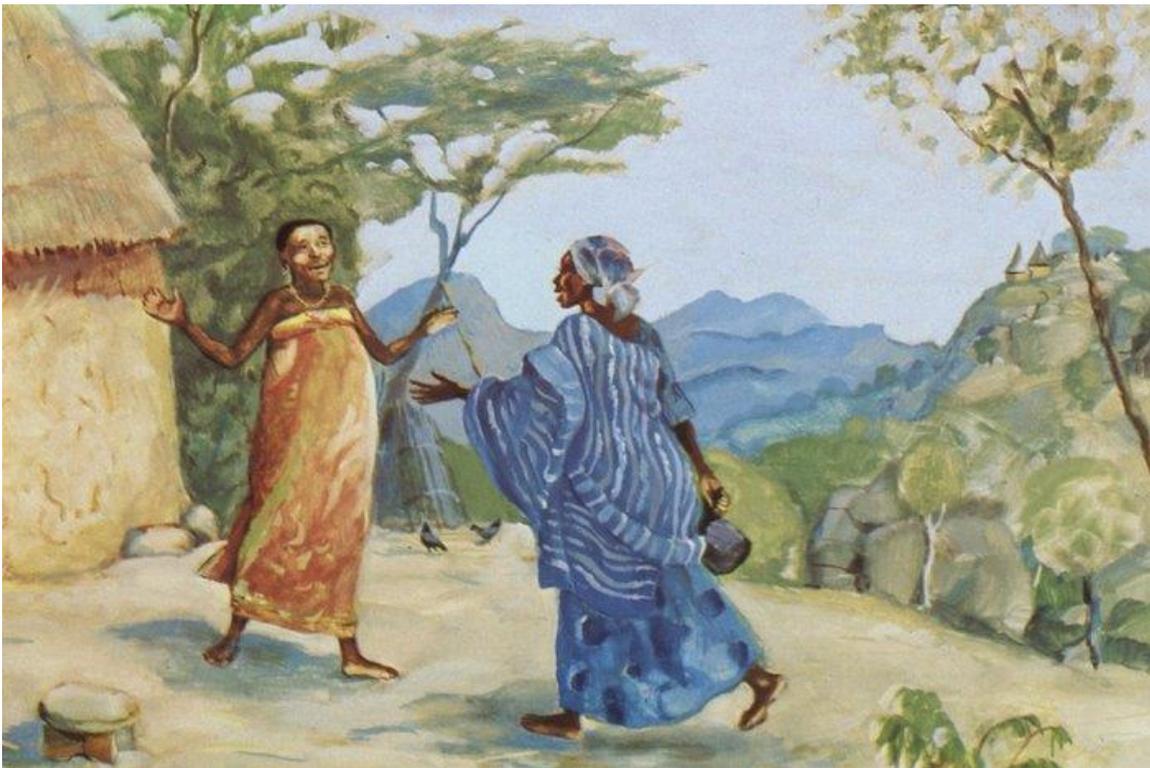
The conversation between our two biblical mothers, as captured by the beauty of the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, couldn't be further removed from the contemporary dialogue above. Instead, Luke narrates the ante-natal stories of John the Baptist and Jesus as their mothers meet to support and protect each other and share in their mutual amazement at their respective pregnancies - praising God all the while.



'Statue of the Visitation' - Church of the Visitation at Ein Karem, Jerusalem

We are told by the angel Gabriel that John the Baptist's birth has been meticulously prepared for in heaven, as has Jesus' own. The child, John, conceived at a time when his parents had given up hope of ever having a baby, is a blessing on both Elizabeth and Zachariah - and on the world. As we learned last week's scripture, John was destined to be a source of proclamation and joy; filled with the prophetic power of the Holy Spirit, he will pave the way for Jesus' earthly ministry and will bring many people back to the Lord.

And, in that divine moment when Elizabeth met Mary, her baby leaped within her. Without a second thought, and hardly realising that she too has been obedient to God in carrying John the Baptist, Elizabeth recognises what her precious child is telling her, and calls a blessing upon her cousin, Mary, for her obedience to God in saying 'yes' to God's messenger in the form of the angel Gabriel.



***'The Visitation - Mary and Elizabeth meet'* by MAFA
Community members, Cameroon**

What must it have been like for Mary in that prophetic moment between the two cousins, I wonder? At last, to be recognised and valued as faithful and obedient, rather than shameful and scandalous! In her own community, Mary had been shunned - surrounded by suspicion and harsh words. Yet now, through the wisdom of years, her cousin, Elizabeth and her womb-bound

baby, John, both see Mary for what she really is: the Ark of the New Covenant! So close are the covenantal similarities between the Old and New Testament that the baby John, dances in Elizabeth's womb, just as David danced before the Ark of the Covenant all that time before him – both of them rejoicing in being in the divine presence of the Lord!



***'Polyptych of the Virgin's Life'* by Dieric Bouts, Prado Museum, Madrid**

When we put Luke's Gospel into the context of the scripture from the Book of Samuel, we finally get to understand the long view. We see God carefully, slowly, patiently preparing for the revelation of His Son. 2 Samuel makes a connection from King David to Christ, and points us to the sacrifice that Christ was to make for us – a sacrifice which God makes for *us*, rather than we for Him.

Today's readings say something else, too: That each and every step along the path of God's fulfilment of His promise to bring a Messiah to the world in an act of deliverance of His people from their sins, is important. Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, David, John the Baptist; Christ Himself... you and me!

Each fragile but necessary link in this long chain, feathered across time, draws each and every one of us to say 'yes' to the Lord who comes to us in the Christ-child.



'The Visitation' by Jacques Daret

In Advent, we are called anew by God to accept our place in His eternal plan, however small a role we might have – and, as we begin to recognise the huge privilege we share in being part of God's great and purposeful chain of Salvation, we are called to dance with joy like David and John; to rejoice like Mary and Elizabeth; and to be obedient like Joseph and Zechariah before the babe Mary is bringing into the world - our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Yours, dancing in the gift of the coming Christ,
Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice

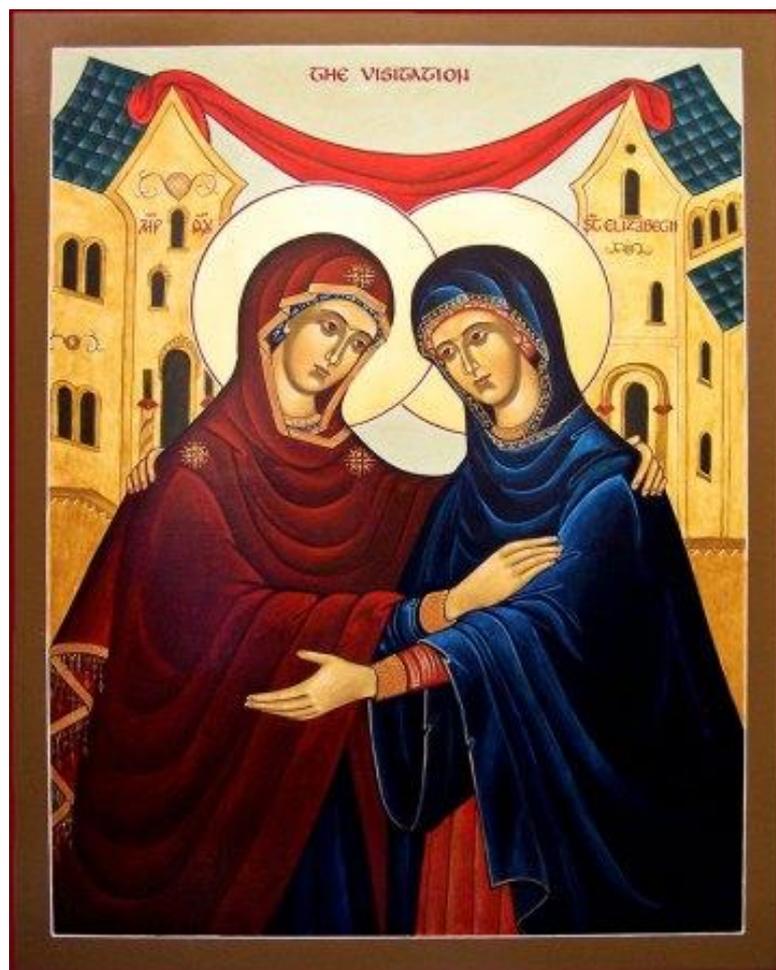
Schedule of Services

(All services begin at 10am unless indicated otherwise)

Date	Service	Chilbolton	Crawley	Littleton	Sparsholt	Wherwell
19 – 27 Dec	<i>Chilbolton Christmas Adventure</i>	Mary, Joseph and their donkey will be in the Church porch – please come to visit them there and if you can bring something you have made at home to do with the Nativity, that would be lovely.				
24 Dec	<i>Nativity Procession</i>					3.30pm – Line the route to watch Mary and Joseph arrive at the War Memorial manger. Carols will be played.
24 Dec	<i>Christmas Eve</i>	Please see Downs Benefice website for the Midnight Holy Communion Service video				
25 Dec	<i>Christmas Day</i>	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Communion	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Service
27 Dec	<i>St Stephen's</i>	Closed	Closed	Closed	Patronal Holy Communion	Closed

Now that the **Month of Prayer** in response to the Lockdown has come to a close, I thought you would appreciate some words of reflection as you journey through Advent. Don't forget that you can find further resources and information, regularly updated, on our Benefice website at: <http://downsbenefice.org/> where you will also find our Christmas Eve Holy Communion Service video.

As we remember the profound faithfulness of Mary as the mother of God, this week, I bring you one of my favourite poems of all time for your reflection: The Annunciation by Edwin Muir. Many of you will have heard me waxing lyrical about it, so I hope you aren't sick of hearing it from me, and that you (come to) love it as much as I do!



The Annunciation by Edwin Muir

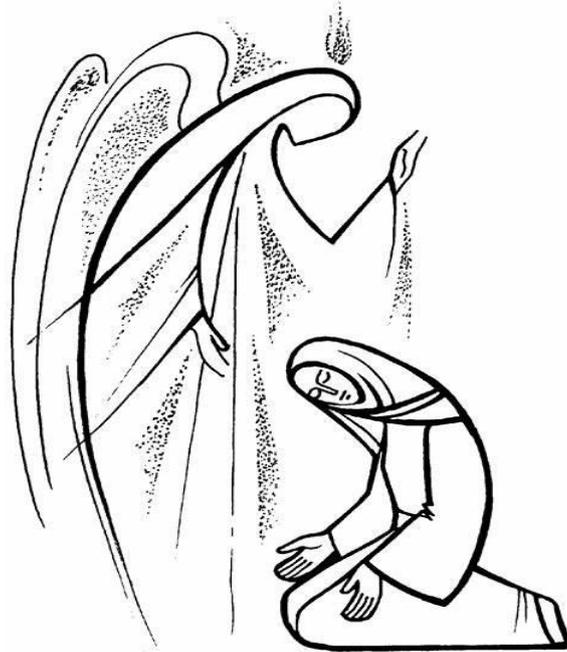
The angel and the girl are met
Earth was the only meeting place.

For the embodied never yet
travelled beyond the shore of space
The eternal spirits in freedom go.

See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,
Each reflects the other's face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there. He's come to her
From far beyond the farthest star,
Feathered through time. Immediacy
Of strangest strangeness is the bliss
that from their limbs all movement takes.
Yet the increasing rapture brings
So great a wonder that it makes
Each feather tremble on his wings

Outside the window footsteps fall
Into the ordinary day
And with the sun along the wall
Pursue their un-returning way
Sound's perpetual roundabout
Rolls its numbered octaves out
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune

But through the endless afternoon
These neither speak nor movement make.
But stare into their deepening trance
As if their grace would never break.



Collect Prayer for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

God our redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the mother of your
Son:
grant that, as she looked for his coming as our Saviour,
so we may be ready to greet Him when he comes again as our
judge;
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.



*And blessed is the fruit
of your womb*

2 Samuel 7: 1-11; 16 - God's Promise to David

After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, 'Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.' Nathan replied to the king, 'Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.'

But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying: 'Go and tell my servant David, This is what the LORD says: 'Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar? Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.'



***'Madonna und Kind'* by Wassily Kandinsky**

Luke 1:26-38 - The Birth of Jesus Foretold

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

And the angel came in unto her, and said, 'Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.' And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

And the angel said unto her, 'Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.'

Then said Mary unto the angel, 'How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?'

And the angel answered and said unto her, 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.'

And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible.' And Mary said, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.' And the angel departed from her.