

Service for 19th December 2021

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Imperfect prayer to a perfect God

Welcome

Hello and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 19th December 2021. Our reflection this week is on the mystery of prayer as we ponder the story of old Zechariah, at last, getting his chance to light the holy incense in the Temple.

Lighting of the fourth Advent Candle

We light this fourth Advent Candle to remind us of our calling to reflect the light of Jesus in this dark world.

Jesus said, You are the world's light... Let your light shine in the sight of all people. Let them see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.

We sing our first carol, *In the bleak midwinter*.

Carol (BPW 166) In the Bleak Midwinter

In the bleak mid-winter,
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter,
Long ago.

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air;
But His mother only,
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part;
Yet, what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart, my heart.

Opening prayers

O mighty God, whose majesty cannot be contained in all the wide courts of heaven, and whose awesome presence would overwhelm the world itself, we marvel to think that you became an infant sleeping in a manger, and that your first visitors were humble shepherds mingled with angels of light. And now here are we; humble and ordinary, but come to worship you along with those shepherds and angels. Receive now the adoration of our hearts and help us to shape our lives as good citizens of your coming kingdom.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Our second carol is *O little town of Bethlehem...*

Carol O Little Town of Bethlehem

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

O morning stars, together
Proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King,
And peace to men on earth!
For Christ is born of Mary;
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in;
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell:
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel.

Offering

For the indescribable gift of Jesus, we bless you heavenly Father. As we give to church and charity, may our generosity echo your own. Receive all our gifts and use them to transform the world in love. Amen.

Our prayers of intercession are led today by Linda Wallace.

Prayers of Intercession

Heavenly Father,

We praise you for all you have shown us in Jesus. Now we know that you are not far away. Promised that no matter who or what we are, no matter what we have done, or failed to do, you will be very near to each and every one of us.

We praise you for the story of Mary and Joseph. We praise you that you showed yourself first to the shepherds in the field, instead of the religious hierarchy.

We praise you for the carols that we sing and joy we share in the arrival of our Saviour into the world. We are all the more thankful that it is not just a story, but a message of the birth of the Saviour of the world.

Forgive us, Father, if we spend so much time preparing to enjoy ourselves that we forget those who will have no joy this Christmas. Forgive us that as we decorate our homes and buy in food and presents, we forget those who have no home, no money and who face great stress and worry about the future.

Forgive us if, as we welcome the baby in the manger, we forget he was the man on the cross.

I ask us now to think of someone we know who will be facing a Christmas without their life partner and companion. For those who will face an empty chair and be left with only memories of Christmases past. We ask God's peace to be upon them. We think of those who have lost their job and who will be facing an uncertain Christmas.

We think of those around the world whose Christmas will be filled with hatred and war. For those risking their lives and leaving everything behind to get their families to a place of safety.

We lift to you now, all those we know who are in need of your peace and healing touch. Whether they be suffering physically, mentally or spiritually. We ask that you will bring them back to good health and wholeness.

We pray now for ourselves and one another, for all that we face in the coming week and beyond, in the knowledge that Christ has come.

We bring our prayers in the name of the one who was, is and always will be Immanuel, and Jesus is his name. Your will be done Father. Amen.

Many thanks, Linda, for those prayers. We hear now our Bible readings from 1 Samuel and from Luke.

Bible readings

1 Samuel 1: 1 - 20

The birth of Samuel

1 There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. **2** He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

3 Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. **4** Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. **5** But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. **6** Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking

her in order to irritate her. ⁷ This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. ⁸ Her husband Elkanah would say to her, 'Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?'

⁹ Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's house. ¹⁰ In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. ¹¹ And she made a vow, saying, 'LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.'

¹² As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ¹⁴ and said to her, 'How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine.'

¹⁵ 'Not so, my lord,' Hannah replied, 'I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. ¹⁶ Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.'

Luke 1: 5 - 25

The birth of John the Baptist foretold

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.'

¹⁹ The angel said to him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.'

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ 'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.'

Our next carol tells the story of Luke chapter 2... *God rest you merry gentlemen...*

Carol God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen

God rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
For Jesus Christ our Saviour,
Was born on Christmas day,
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray;
O tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy.

From God our Heavenly Father
A blessed Angel came,
And unto certain Shepherds
Brought tidings of the same,
How that in Bethlehem was born
The Son of God by Name;
O tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy.

Now to the Lord sing praises,
All you within this place,
And with true love and brotherhood
Each other now embrace,
This holy tide of Christmas
All others doth efface.
O tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy.

And now may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be
pleasing in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

Imperfect prayer to a perfect God

Prayer! Why? When? How? Where? What?

Why? It spills from us all of our days. We can't help it. Even the atheist prays to a God he doesn't believe in when the going gets tough. It's a way of trying to get something done. It's a recognition of our need for something and someone beyond ourselves. It's an admission of the limit of human resources. It's an expression of hope that things can get better. It's reconnecting with love. It's the discovery of our best selves.

When? Whenever a need arises... When you get up in the morning... Five times a day... With every breath... As a continuous feeling of connection within you... At bedtime...

How? With a congregation on a Sunday... Last thing at night... Saying words to God at the start of the day... Writing letters to God in your journal... Using an app... Saying prayers with a group of friends, pouring out your heart to God... Joining in the set prayers or liturgy of some group you belong to... Feeling a presence as you walk through a winter wood... Sitting in silence with a candle in the dark...

Where? In bed... In the woods... In the church... In your lounge... In your car... In the cathedral... On the bus... In a holy place like a chapel... In every place, for the earth is the Lord's and everything in it...

What are we praying about? Exam results... Illnesses... Covid... Wars... Climate change... Relationships...

Who? Well of course God is the recipient of our prayers... But which version of God? Is it a God who pulls strings for our personal convenience? Is it a God who sits aloof above it all and leaves matters to us? Is it a God who listens and cares and wants to talk things over with us, and might just change his mind, or our mind?

And **for whom** do we pray? Children we have, children we'd like to have, grandchildren we have, grandchildren we'd like to have, parents, nephews, nieces, sisters, brothers, grandparents, friends, neighbours, church... Anyone...

So many aspects to prayer... I imagine Elizabeth and Zechariah had different ways of praying and different understandings of what was happening in prayer as they grew older. Their lives were shaped by one central problem: childlessness.

Nowadays we rightly do not attach any sense of blame to childlessness, but in biblical times it was seen as a sure sign of some big sin. If a couple had no kids, for sure, God must be punishing them, was the attitude. Maybe Zechariah had cheated in his tax... Maybe the couple had been unkind to a needy relative... Maybe they'd harboured evil thoughts against their neighbours... There had to be something!

And this suspicion of some evil secret must, I guess, have shaped their prayer lives. To begin with, this righteous couple prayed with a confidence, only gradually becoming nervous as no little Zechariahs or Elizabeths were conceived... Then, as the months went by a growing anxiety coloured their prayers as relatives started to interfere and offer unwelcome advice... And then in prayer they felt anger, as the months turned into years... *why them?* They had been righteous, prayerful, holy people, and this was how God rewarded them? And then desperation might have set into their spirits as they faced the disgrace of being so publicly and roundly rejected by God, at least in the eyes of some of their neighbours... And then, perhaps, a weak resignation to reality... It was not given to them to have children...

Confidence, nervousness, anxiety, anger, desperation, despair and resignation. This might have been the raw material of their prayer over the years and decades...

Now Zechariah was a priest, but there were lots of priests, so his division would have got to serve in the temple only twice a year, for a week at a time. And there was a holy place, just next to the Holy of Holies, where there was an altar and incense was burned as an expression of prayer. But this was such a rare privilege that to get to actually burn the incense, well, that might happen only once in a lifetime...

And so in our story, as circumstances would have it, well, this was the moment in Zechariah's lifetime - the climax of his ministry as a priest - when he would get to be the one who went into this holy room to burn the incense... That visible sign of God, a sweet-smelling indicator of his presence, an external expression of the prayers of God's people wafting up to heaven...

Outside this room, a group was praying... Maybe they prayed Psalms or other liturgy... Maybe they simply poured out their hearts to God in free words; maybe they presented their hearts with all their hopes and fears in a kind of reverential awe before God; maybe it was a combination of all these ways of praying...

Imagine, though, how Zechariah might report his experience...

* * * *

His awesome presence was with me, there and then, in that holy place... Then I became aware of another manifestation of presence... At first I thought it must be some trick of the light, but no, it was something much more... elaborate... There, on the right side of the altar, was a figure robed in light. I was absolutely terrified. My whole body trembled; my knees began to give way. At first I could only look through the corners of my eyes, but then the angel began to speak and, without making a conscious choice, I looked straight into his other-worldly beauty.

Somehow my mind attended to his words and I could remember every one afterwards. Do not be afraid, he told me; my prayers had been heard. Yes, and then my terror was displaced by a feeling and an experience I have never had before or since. I was enveloped in the angel's presence; absorbed by his message; he had the entire attention of my body, my mind, my soul, my heart.

And his words astonished me. Yes, God had heard my prayers, and my wife Elizabeth would have a son, and we should call him John. Later I pondered the meaning of this name, which is 'God has shown favour'! John would bring me delight and joy; he would live as a dedicated Nazarene and would be filled with the Holy Spirit even in the womb. He would carry out a mission of God - to call people back to a proper worship and a righteous way of living.

But then I looked at my own wrinkled hands and I remembered Elizabeth's advanced years. I remembered how all our years of prayer had become rather hollow.

And, yes, I spoke my little doubts to the angel and he replied in an intensely quiet voice; a voice of calm authority that need work up no emotion to make its point, for its point was absolutely the truth.

“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you, and tell you this good news. And now you will be unable to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

The angel melted away, and I remained in trembling silence for a while - five minutes or an hour, I really don't know. Recollecting myself to some degree, I at last emerged from the holy place and was indeed unable to form words. I gesticulated wildly, and eventually gave the people who had been praying outside, a sense of how their prayers had been answered inside.

When Elizabeth did conceive her child, she said that God had taken away her disgrace among the people. I could say nothing, but my heart was glad.

* * * *

Do you see the different expressions of prayer flying around in this story? The evolving private prayers of a lifetime, from Elizabeth and Zechariah... The formal and informal prayers of the priests and other worshippers outside the holy place... The prayers expressed by the burning of incense...

At just the right time, everything comes together. Hang on a minute? At just the *right* time? For Zechariah and Elizabeth, this was many years too late. God had missed their deadline by decades. Through ages of untold heartache, the couple's prayer had not been answered. It wasn't the right moment for them as they now would become elderly parents. But it was the right moment for the purposes of God.

Had there been any point in all their praying? If God will do what God desires, when God chooses, why bother praying at all?

Let's deepen and refine our sense of what prayer is. Let's consider the **direction** of prayer, the **organ** of prayer in the human frame, and the **purpose** of prayer.

First of all, the **direction** of prayer. Of course, scripture includes examples of people firing requests **up** to God, like incense rising; and sometimes God grants the very thing a person praying is asking for. A king asks for wisdom... a young second wife asks for a son... Prayer does include sending requests up to heaven...

But when Jesus' disciples, according to Luke's gospel, asked him to teach them how to pray, he gave a prayer, or perhaps more properly, a form of prayer, that essentially flowed in quite the opposite direction. Not our requests going up from earth to heaven but God's vision of the way things should be coming from heaven down to earth. The Lord's Prayer reverses the direction of prayer. The Lord's Prayer prays that the Father's will may be done here on earth, as it is in heaven. In the Lord's Prayer, prayer is a shaping of the human condition to be more accurately aligned with the Kingdom of God.

Even the **requests** of the Lord's Prayer are simply examples of God's ways being respected in our world. It's "give **us** our daily bread", not "give me a luxurious lifestyle". This is, in effect, a prayer for global justice.

It's "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." This is a prayer that the basis of human relations will reflect the basis of God's relations with us: that is to say, grace and forgiveness.

The prayer ends with this affirmation: "**Yours** is the kingdom, the power and the glory." Yours, not mine! As Christians, whatever else the Bible may teach about prayer, this specific pattern of prayer, explicitly given by our Lord and Saviour in answer to the question *Teach us to pray*, must be the foundation of all our prayers.

And what of the **organ** of prayer in the human frame? By this I mean the heart as opposed to the head. A post-enlightenment western European view might tend to look at prayer cerebrally. We are too much in our minds. A logical analysis of prayer may be helpful to a certain point, but it cannot fully grasp the experience of prayer.

In Hebrew terms, the heart was not merely the centre of emotions, but also the seat of rationality and intention. Prayer is a way of relating to God with our whole being: our bodies, our feelings, our understandings, our plans... The principal organ of prayer for the human being is the heart, not the head. Benefits desired by the mind are not to be prayer's driving force.

The heart is the place of compassion. The heart is the seat of love. The heart is the place where just, kind, gracious, forgiving and transforming intentions are formed. Yes, the heart is the organ of prayer in a person.

And what of the **purpose** of prayer? This has been revealed along the way: Prayer shapes human hearts to be more accurately aligned with the Kingdom of God. But that's not why we pray. Prayer is a love language. We pray so that love transforms us into love.

When we wait many years for some difficulty to be resolved, we pray in love. Maybe through our imperfect prayer, the perfect God brings the resolution we long for. Or maybe that resolution never comes in this life. But we pray because we love and we love because we pray.

And that loving prayer transforms us and also transforms our world, and may well cause the resolution we originally sought. Or we may never see a resolution here on earth, but we pray because we love and we love because we pray, and that love most certainly transforms the situation, and gives us a confidence that even if we must wait for eternity, God's loving plans will come to pass.

We pray if we get sick, for God's loving faithfulness is with us. We pray when we are offered treatment. We pray when we are recovering. And we pray if recovery has been ruled out by the doctors. We pray for healing. Sometimes that prayer is answered physically. It's always answered spiritually as we are drawn closer to the God who is the very definition of love.

We pray because we love - we love God and the people around us. This inspires us to spend time with God, the source of life and the wellspring of love.

And we love because we pray. Of course countless people love without consciously praying. But for us who pray, God reshapes our hearts into vessels of love.

We pray because we love. We love because we pray.

Of course, our prayers are human and imperfect... they may be fitful, occasional, selfish, formal, liturgical, conversational, but if our prayers are imperfect, that's okay. We are praying to a perfect God, and that fact makes all the difference.

My counsel is that we pray to shape our hearts into vessels of love. And so we **must** pray for ourselves, not for wealth, fame or power, but simply to make us more like Christ.

Am I giving a counsel of perfection here? No, rather a counsel of inspiration. God is perfect love, truth, beauty, hope and justice; we are imperfect creatures calling out to him. God receives our prayers and God engages with them. His goals are not our goals, and he is far more concerned with your character, and your sense of calling and your belovedness, than he is with some particular detail of your life right now. He may know that the best way of achieving his goal, to shape your character, and bring you to maturity, and to bless our world, is to allow for that little thing you long for to be granted. But he may know far better than that, and choose not to grant you your request, in order to achieve his larger goals of love, peace and justice for all. Zechariah and Elizabeth's imperfect prayers were not 'answered' in the way or at the time they had hoped. But they **were** answered at the time and in the way that best fitted the grander purposes of making preparations for the Saviour to come to the earth.

Who knows what wider, grander purposes are being achieved when God does not do what you request, just when you want him to? But be absolutely certain of this: God always answers your prayers and he is always drawing you into his loving embrace, and he is always shaping your heart to be that vessel of love.

So carry on praying. Pray as you can. Pray in various ways. And, if you don't know how to pray, remember Jesus taught his disciples exactly how to do it.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

After the message we've heard today it seems very fitting to sing, ***O Come let us adore him!***

Carol **O Come All Ye Faithful**

O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold him,
Born the King of angels:

Refrain:

*O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord.*

God of God,
Light of Light eternal,
Lo! he abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Very God,
Begotten not created:

Refrain

See how the shepherds,
Summoned to his cradle,
Leaving their flocks, draw nigh with lowly fear;
We too will thither
Bend our joyful footsteps:

Refrain

Lo! star-led chieftains,
Magi, Christ adoring,
Offer him incense, gold and myrrh;
We to the Christ-child
Bring our hearts' oblations:

Refrain

Sing, choirs of angels,
Sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above.
Glory to God,
Glory in the highest:

Refrain:

*O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord.*

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, evermore.
Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you;
May he guide you through the wilderness;
Protect you through the storm;
May he bring you home rejoicing
At the wonders he has shown you;
May he bring you home rejoicing
Once again into our doors.