

# A month of Sundays – December 2021



Preston Ribble Circuit

Ministry Team

# Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> December 2021

## Call to worship

Your light is the only light I need  
as I travel through life's mystery.  
Your word the only voice I hear,  
that still small voice that leads me  
to the place where I should be.  
Your presence is the only company I need,  
as I walk this narrow road.  
Your fellowship the warmth I crave  
to help me on my way.

## Opening Prayers

Enter this day knowing that God will lead you into understanding, of this world and your place in it, and His Word and its promises to you. Draw close to God and be His companion through this day.

My Lord and my God, take me from all that keeps me from thee.

My Lord and my God, grant me all that leads me to thee.

My Lord and my God, take me from myself and give me completely to thee

*Nicholas of Flue (1417-87)*

A word of confession:

When our faith is weak, you strengthen us, when we lose our way you rescue us, when we fall into unhelpful ways, you forgive us.

Gracious Father, please remind us as we forget, that your love is unconditional, always moulding us into what we could be, always blessing us that we might glorify you.

For love, grace and forgiveness, we thank you.

For those who stand firm when faith is tested, or in the face of persecution are not afraid to confess your name, we give thanks. For faithful saints of every age who with Paul declare to live is Christ and to die is gain, bless their sacrifice, and all whose faith has been born or strengthened by being in their presence.

## **Hymn Singing the Faith 745 For all the saints**

### **Readings**

Philippians 1 v 3-11

Pay particular attention to this verse

*How I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.*

### **Reflection (Denise Johnson)**

We are in the early days of December. The season of Advent has begun and you may even be displaying your Christmas decorations (I know I will). It is a hopeful time, an exciting time, a busy time and an expensive time. Conversely it can also be a difficult time, a stressful time and a worrying time. However you are feeling I wish you the comfort of the sentence above from the book of Philippians. This is a prayer written by the author to the community of Philippi who were loved and were encouraged to love. They were encouraged to be overflowing with love and for that love to be so strong that it allowed them to be intuitive about how to live and the choices that they made.

Life throws choices at us regularly. The mundane choices of what shall I have for tea or perhaps more complex choices about where to live or which treatment to have. We sit with these situations, and we choose what we honestly think is for the best. Choice is a part of life. Love plays its part in these choices especially when it comes to choices about our

relationships with others. To love, however, is not really a choice? The message of Jesus and the thread running through the New Testament is that we must love God and love others unconditionally. It is not easy and loving enemies and those who persecute you is pretty difficult. There are certainly people over the years who have been a part of my life who have been hard to love and I am sure that is true for you too.

In order to love others we should really pay attention to loving ourselves, not in an egotistical way but in a gentle and wholesome way. Some of us are not very good at loving ourselves and struggle with what we consider to be our inadequacies. Let us focus on the good within ourselves and not our weaknesses. Today I urge you to find some time for yourself to help you to feel good and hopeful and loving. Enjoy a treat (your favourite biscuit maybe 😊), ring someone or visit someone who is positive and helpful, take a little gentle exercise, run a lovely bath or linger in the shower – whatever makes you feel good do more of that. Love overflows much easier when we feel loved. Amen.

## **Prayers**

Your love flows like a stream into the ocean of your Grace.  
Your love encircles this world, displays your faithfulness.  
Your love is patient and kind, brings wholeness and true peace.  
Your love is all we desire to heal our brokenness.  
As all things pass and fade away love remains eternally.

May God the provider of green pastures and quiet waters be the peace in our hearts today.

May Jesus our guide on mountain top and valley deep be the hope in our hearts today.

May the Spirit of truth and knowledge comforter and friend be the strength in our hearts today.

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 forever.  
Amen.

## **Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

### **Call to worship**

Let us open our hearts, our minds, and our eyes  
to see the generous gifts of God,  
and respond with praise and thanksgiving.

Let us worship together the one God,  
Father, Son and Spirit.

God of earth, stand among us; God of air, breathe within us.  
God of water, flow around us; God of fire, burn within us.

Christ of the past, Word made flesh, speak to us.  
Christ of the present, revealing the Father's glory, be born in us.  
Christ of the future, bearing witness to the truth, live your life in  
us.

Spirit of mercy and peace, we open our hearts to you, move  
among us.  
Spirit of gift and grace, we open our minds to you, move within  
us.  
Spirit of truth and love, we open our lives to you, send us out.

## **A prayer of confession**

Loving God, how do we begin to find the words? You share yourself with us. We are slow to respond. You come to us, seeking our companionship. We turn away. You speak to us, offering us comfort and the words of peace. We are deaf to your calling. We prefer to listen to the voices of the world. We give in to temptation.

Yet you continue to call. Your presence continues to sustain and strengthen us. You continue to give us all that we need for fullness of life in body, mind and spirit. When we are fearful for the future, hold us. When our prayers seem unanswered and there is no place to go, journey with us. When we believe that all is lost and there is no future for us, reassure us.

Loving God, when words are not enough, you go on loving us. Forgive us and heal us. Forgive and heal your church in times of challenge and change. Enable us to share good news. Help us to share your story that is our story.

In Jesus' name.  
Amen.

## **Luke 3.7-18**

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them,

“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

### **Hymn**

1 King of glory, King of peace,  
I will love Thee;  
and that love may never cease,  
I will move Thee.  
Thou hast granted my request,  
Thou hast heard me;  
Thou didst note my working breast,  
Thou hast spared me.

2 Wherefore with my utmost art  
I will sing Thee,  
and the cream of all my heart  
I will bring Thee.  
Though my sins against me cried,  
Thou didst clear me;  
and alone, when they replied,  
Thou didst hear me.

3 Sev'n whole days, not one in sev'n,  
I will praise Thee;  
in my heart, though not in heav'n,  
I can raise Thee.

Small it is, in this poor sort  
to enroll Thee:  
e'en eternity's too short  
to extol Thee.

The phrase 'What then, should we do?' This phrase appears three times in the Gospel reading.

3 different people ask the question from a specific context. We therefore get 3 different answers. What should we do depends on who we are how we live our life what our responsibilities are. There are many other examples in Luke's Gospel – it is a recurring question.

When I was learning to sail I constantly asked the question what do I do . My instructor would answer it depends on the wind, the tide, the boat and the way you sail. The wind has direction and force that you interact with. The tide is another force we sometimes can use to propel us forward and sometimes holds us back. Each kind of boat has different characteristic how it handles as, how fast it travels peculiarities around the way the sails are set. The person sailing makes a constant series of decisions that affects what the crew do and when. There are parallels with the Christian calling.

Although the answer seems different dependent on content there are similarities in the answer.

Be generous  
Be practical  
Be ethical  
Be content with enough

What then should we do? How might we bear good fruit? With whom might we share our coat? In our workplaces, in our daily encounters whatever their context, are those we share time with able to discern that we are followers of 'The Way' by our actions? How so? And if not, why not?

## **Intercessory prayer**

God of justice,  
we pray for those whose voice we hear but try to ignore –  
and that we might listen.

We pray for those whose voice makes us uncomfortable –  
and that we might understand.

We pray for those in the wilderness of poverty –  
and that we might share.

We pray for those in broken relationships –  
and that we might be bridges.

We pray for the confused –  
and that we might be patient.

We pray for the angry –  
and that we might offer calm.

We pray for those who have no voice –  
and that we might be a place for them to be heard.  
Amen.

## **Blessing**

Lord, help us to go into the world in peace;  
to be of good courage;  
to hold fast to that which is good;  
to strengthen the fainthearted;  
to support the weak;  
to honour everyone;  
and to love and serve the Lord.  
Be within us and among us,  
and remain with us always.  
Amen.

# Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021

## Call to worship:

For the hungry, a banquet;  
for the homeless, a palace;  
for the powerless; authority;  
for the poor, riches beyond expectation.  
We dream of a world turned on its head,  
where all are blessed.

**Hymn 186:** Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord  
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!  
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;  
Tender to me the promise of His Word;  
In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.  
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of His name!  
Make known His might, the deeds His arm has done;  
His mercy sure, from age to age the same;  
His holy Name, the Lord, the mighty One.  
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of His might!  
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;  
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight;  
The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.  
Tell out, my soul, the glories of His Word!  
Firm is His promise, and His mercy sure.  
Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord  
To children's children and forevermore!

## Let us pray:

Lord God,  
you are light in our darkness.  
What a blessing you are!  
You are purpose in our wandering.  
You are revealed in the angel's greeting.  
You are known in the acceptance of Mary.  
You are felt in the care of Joseph.  
You are received in the following of the shepherds.

You are given in the gifts of the magi.  
What a blessing you are!  
You, Lord God, are a blessing today.  
Almighty God, we have not always followed your path.  
Bring us back to you, from all the diversions we have been on;  
bring us back, Almighty God.  
Almighty God, we have often lost focus on our Advent journey.  
Bring us back to the meaning of Christmas, of loving  
and giving, of receiving and blessing;  
bring us back, Almighty God.

With penitent hearts, we stand before you,  
seeking your gift of blessing and forgiveness.  
And we hear the gentle words of God,  
offering us the gift of forgiveness.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Reading:** Luke 1: 39 – 45

### **Reflection (by Rev Janet)**

The word 'bless' is used in many situations: 'Ah bless' we might say when a toddler covers themselves in spaghetti sauce while exploring the world of solid food and spoons.

'Bless you' said sincerely to the nurse taking a blood sample may bring a smile to a weary face and lift their tired spirits.

'Bless you' may also be our automatic instinctive response to a sneeze;

'The Lord bless you and keep you' is a heartfelt prayer.

From the playful to the profound, words of blessing convey deep meaning and carry particular power. Where, when and how should we bless others? What are sources of blessing to us? And what do we mean when we use the word 'bless' or 'blessing'?

Some find blessing through music and song. In 2020 a song, based on those words – The Lord bless you and keep you –

went 'viral', as they say. Millions of people all round the world have heard and responded to it, with different countries and even towns putting their own version together. It is now known as the UK Blessing. What a wonderful way to share God's blessing – send someone a song.

Elizabeth told her cousin Mary that she believed she was blessed among women. Mary had sung that great song of praise that we call "The Magnificat" when visited by the angel Gabriel, but I doubt that she was feeling particularly blessed at this point in her story. Young, poor, unmarried, unexpectedly pregnant and the talk of the whole village. She must have felt lonely, afraid and vulnerable. But among all the gossip and judgment and condemnation, her older cousin Elizabeth blessed her.

So, when we bless someone, what is it that we are doing? One way of putting it might be that when we bless someone, we are saying that we want the best that God has for them, and that we want them to know God in a new and more vibrant way.

Do you want your neighbours to be blessed by God? Do you want your neighbourhood to be blessed by God? Then why not do it? Pray God's blessing over your friends and neighbours, and over your village, town or city. Pray these words: "The Lord bless and keep you" ... but not just over them. Pray God's blessing over people who are struggling, people who are suffering, people in any kind of need.

It is a human interaction to bless people, but it is also a divine one. God is the source of all blessing, whether we do it through song, through words and prayers, or through gestures such as hugging – doesn't hugging mean so much more to us now, after over a year of it not being allowed! And, remember, God's blessing is not restricted only to those we think deserve it. Just as he blessed Mary and Joseph, God even blesses you and me!

## **Prayers:**

God of Advent and Christmas,  
We pray for those expecting babies at this time –  
those for whom the news is welcome,  
and those for whom it is not;

We pray for the people that the world disregards –  
those in our own cities and towns  
and those in the poorest nations across the world;  
We pray for those who are journeying to Bethlehem, ready to  
meet with you there,  
and those who find no meaning in Christmas;  
We pray for those who are excited about Christmas  
and those who are dreading it;  
We pray for churches that will be full  
and those that will be empty;

We pray for those who know they are blessed today,  
and those who feel forgotten, neglected and cast aside.  
We pray for ourselves and for one another  
as we prepare to welcome your Son  
as Christmas child and Saviour. **Amen.**

## **The Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn 187:** The angel Gabriel from heaven came

## **Blessing**

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you,  
and be gracious to you;  
the Lord look on you with kindness,  
and give you peace.  
Now and for ever more.  
Amen.

# Christmas 25<sup>th</sup> / 26<sup>th</sup> December 2021

## Call to worship

“O, come let us adore him. O, come let us adore him.  
O, come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.”

On this Sunday, the day after Christmas day we continue our celebrations, and take time ponder the real meaning of Christmas, how Jesus was born as one of us, came and lived among us, bringing his light and love into our dark world.



## Carol: **In the bleak midwinter** by Christina Rossetti



In the bleak midwinter, 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 midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;  
Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.  
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed  
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

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.

## **Bible Reading – Luke 2 v15-20**

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' <sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

<sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

<sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying, and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

## **Reflection**

I wonder if you can remember as a child folding up a square of paper, cutting out little triangles and then the thrill of opening it to find a snowflake. Maybe you hung them up in the window or on a wall with many others to decorate the room.

Up in the mountains one winter with a beautiful blue sky stretched across the landscape I was amazed to see some perfectly formed snowflakes falling out of the sky, even more wonderful than the ones I had made in school.

This reminds me about a preacher who used a snowflake as an illustration in his sermon of how we are all individual and different yet loved by God. After the service a scientist came up to him and told the preacher that he was involved in researching snowflakes up in the Swiss mountains and it really was true that no two snowflakes are the same. In fact, he told the preacher, if you melt a snowflake and then refreeze it, it will even recrystallise into exactly the same snowflake shape!

Our carol 'In the bleak mid-winter' paints a picture of a frosty cold world into which the saviour of the world was humbly born.

Christina Rossetti, who wrote the carol, faced many difficult experiences in her life and had depression for many years – for her, when life seems very hard, it can be like a bleak winter. The one thing that kept Christina going was her Christian faith,

through her trials remembering how Jesus Christ was born vulnerable as a baby into our bleak world, sharing in our suffering and experiencing the full range of human emotions was a source of hope.

The carol connects with our reading which seems appropriate for these times. Following the visitation of the angels to marginalised shepherds, they said to one another ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’

What they saw amazed them and they went and found the baby Jesus just as they had been told – it was not a dream. They returned rejoicing telling many people about what had happened. To this day there remains a shepherd village outside of Bethlehem where they share the story of their ancestors who met the baby Jesus that night.

We are told at the beginning of his Gospel by Luke that he thoroughly investigated the stories about Jesus so ‘you may know the truth concerning these things’ (1v4). I imagine him interviewing Mary in her older age sharing the highs and lows about her son Jesus. Mary did not only remember what had happened, but she had ‘pondered’ and ‘treasured’ them in her heart for many years.

So, on this day take time to ‘ponder’ and ‘treasure’ the coming of Jesus Christ into our dark world. Remember how his love has brought light into the dark times of your life. We recall the times of lockdown in the last 20 months, how they felt like being in a dark tunnel and give thanks for Jesus’ light in the dark places helping us through. Then consider how you will give thanks, remembering the final verse of our Carol – ‘Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart’.

## **Closing Prayer**

Lord Jesus, born as a baby as one of us. I give thanks for your love and care in the dark times of my life. I lift up to you now those who are facing trials at this time who need you light and peace in their situation. Help me to be faithful to you and share your light and love in the year to come. AMEN