

DAY ONE -- ELIZABETH

Good morning to you all,

The first couple of words for our stars are not ones particularly well known in the cultural nativity story, although most church stalwarts will have heard of them. Today, we start with ELIZABETH. Elizabeth's story can be found in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. She is a descendant of Aaron, who was the first of the High Priests of Israel, and older brother to Moses. She was married to Zechariah but they had no children, despite both being righteous before God and living according to all God's commandments. But, after her husband is visited by an angel, Elizabeth becomes pregnant. When the child is born, he is named John, and becomes 'John the Baptist', who points people towards Jesus.

Whilst she is still pregnant, Elizabeth is visited by her younger cousin Mary, who is also pregnant. We are told that, when Mary arrives, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and her baby leaps in her womb. There is a lot going on for this woman, whom we often gloss over in nativity plays! Moreover, we have quite a lot of spoken words associated with Elizabeth, something few women in the Bible are afforded. Some of the words she says to Mary are used daily by Christians across the world: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". Now, if you are CoS and these do not ring a bell, this is not surprising: they are part of the 'Hail Mary' prayer. But, whilst the CoS tradition has side-stepped these words, millions of our sisters and brothers of Christ echo Elizabeth's words whenever they offer this prayer.

Elizabeth's story might seem small in the context of the whole Christian bible. Nonetheless, her place in history is marked by who her ancestors were, who her child was to become, but--perhaps most significantly of all--by being filled by the Holy Spirit and proclaiming her experience of God. In that respect, Elizabeth is a good example for many of us to follow, today.

Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWO -- ZECHARIAH

Good morning everyone,

Today's word, ZECHARIAH, gives us the 'other half' of the Elizabeth's story. It is interesting, although by no means unusual, that although it was Elizabeth who carried the baby and gave birth to him (a not undangerous endeavour at the time) more words are devoted to Zechariah than Elizabeth. Anyway, what of Zechariah? He was a priest from the order of Abijah, and he too was righteous before God and lived according to all God's commandments. It was not looking good for them to have a child as they were both "getting on in years" (this phrase amused me, but this is what the NRSV translation says, so I thought I'd share it!)

We begin with Zechariah being selected as the priest to go into The Holy Place to make the incense offering, whilst everyone else prayed outside. Whilst inside, the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah; unsurprisingly, he is terrified. Most of us would be scared witless should an angel appear in our midst! Moreover, the Israelite people had not known God or God's angels to appear to anyone for over 400 years. This was, indeed, most unexpected. The angel tells him not to be afraid (they *always* say that, right?!) and that his prayers have been heard. His wife Elizabeth is to have a son, whose name is to be John. John is to be filled with the Holy Spirit before birth, a prophet with the spirit and power of Elijah, and make the people of Israel ready for the coming of their Lord. Zechariah is, naturally, quite sceptical due to his and Elizabeth's ages. Yet, for this puzzlement, Gabriel renders Zechariah temporarily mute. Outside, the praying people are starting to wonder what is taking Zechariah so long, then when he emerges unable to speak, they know something big has happened.

Zechariah remains mute throughout the pregnancy and even after the birth, until the baby is 8 days old. This is when he is to be circumcised and named. Everyone assumes he'll be called Zechariah, after his father, but Elizabeth insists on John. They appeal to the father, who writes on a tablet "His name is John". He is immediately able to speak and begins praising God. At the end of Luke, we have the words he is said to have sung, praising God, foretelling of the life of his son, and the work of God. This song is less well-known than Mary's Magnificat or the Hail Mary prayer, but it is part of regular worship for many Christians and is really quite beautiful. I invite you today, if you have a little to time, to have a read: Luke 1:68-79.

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." May you know that peace this day, Fee.



DAY THREE – GABRIEL

Good morning everyone,

Today, we are thinking about GABRIEL. Many of us, when we think of the Angel Gabriel, think of cute wee people (usually girls) dressed in white with wings and tinsel halos. The biblical Gabriel is a little different, and I have enjoyed learning a little more of him in preparation for today's thoughts. The words in the Bible translated as "angel" mean something like "messenger" or, even, "minister". This is perhaps emphasised by few angels being named in the Bible, leaving us to remember the message rather than messenger. However, whilst many angels act as messengers—and many messengers are latterly considered to be angels—their biblical remit is even broader (think 'choir of angels' singing above the shepherds). Gabriel is therefore quite unique. We are told his name both times he appears in Luke, a name which means "Greatness of God": first, when he appears to Zechariah in the Temple and then when he appears to Mary. There is no doubt over this angel's identity; moreover, the words spoken by him tell us that he identifies as male whilst giving us more detail about his angelic role. He stands in the presence of God and is sent, by God, to give people on earth good news. He also has the power to change people's physicality, such as rendering Zechariah mute. I also wonder if he looks a bit intimidating, as he has to tell both Zechariah and Mary not to be afraid. Perhaps that's because he came out of nowhere, or perhaps it is how he looks (I imagine him looking like a rather stern, scary-looking angel figure we have in the manse: it makes us giggle each year, but I definitely would not want to encounter a human-sized one...ever!). Overall, our nativity plays get the name correct, but most of the rest of our interpretations have been coloured by centuries of culture, lore and artwork (there is no mention of Gabriel having wings, for example!)

Like many aspects of the nativity story, the details around Gabriel have been lost or distorted over time. The fundamental truth of his role remains, however: he is sent by God to bring good news to people on earth. Perhaps that is something more of us might emulate in the days and weeks to come...? Grace and peace be with you, all. Fee.



DAY FOUR – MARY

Good afternoon to you all,

With my apologies for not posting earlier (too many appointments today!), I would us to think today about MARY. She is probably the most well-known of all the nativity characters, other than Jesus himself. And it is not surprising: she did all the hard work, after all! Yet, she is also side-lined by a great majority of Protestant Christians, who wish to distance themselves from the Marian doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, and other traditions. As such, I fear we lose the richness of this pivotal person in our faith's story, to the detriment of us all.

Mary is mentioned in all four Gospels (and Acts), but there are only birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, and even then, Matthew's focus is on Joseph. But between these 2 accounts, we learn that our story starts with Mary betrothed to Joseph, but they are yet to be married, live together or have sexual relations. We do not know how old Mary is, but she may have been as young as 12 or 13. Whatever her age, she is confronted by the Angel Gabriel and told she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God. And, I have to say, I think she takes this news remarkably well! Also, having heard about her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy, she goes and spends 3 months with her: solidarity? comfort? learning-curve? Whatever the motives behind this journey, it is when she meets Elizabeth that Mary praises God with her famous hymn, the Magnificat. If you wish to read this today, you can find it at Luke 1:46-55.

When the early church was grappling with what all this might mean—the incarnation, the role of the Holy Spirit, the significance of Mary—one of the things they agreed about Mary was that she could properly be called 'Theotokos', which literally means 'God-bearer' but is usually translated as 'Mother of God'. That is one powerful title. No matter whether we believe in the immaculate conception or Mary's eternal virginity, I hope we can agree that to bear God, to give birth to God, to nurse God, is an awe-inspiring role. Mary had a relationship with God, through Jesus, that no other human being possibility could, and that is worthy of reflection, not just to give thanks for her courage in taking on that role but also how we might come closer to God ourselves in our own ways.

"God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." May your soul magnify the Lord our God this day, as we rejoice in a God who brings justice and peace to earth. Blessings, Fee.



DAY FIVE – JOSEPH

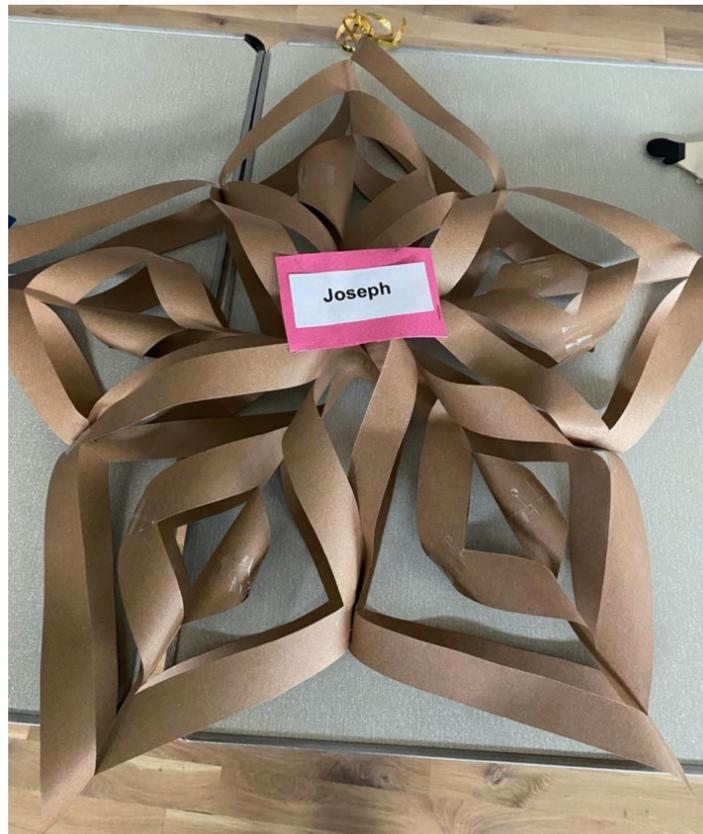
Good morning everyone,

JOSEPH is something of an enigmatic figure in the nativity story. We know little of him, and he disappears from the Gospels once Jesus is an adult, with only Matthew really focussing on his part in the nativity. Even so, the glimpses we have of him give us some things to ponder.

We are told that Joseph is a descendant of King David, although the Gospel genealogies in Luke and Matthew differ as to which of David's sons, Solomon or Nathan, comes next in the family tree. We understand from later on in the Gospels that Joseph worked with his hands, perhaps with wood as a carpenter, but it might have been with stone, or metal, or, indeed, in some form of construction work more generally. He may be living in Nazareth at the time of his betrothal to Mary, or he may be in Bethlehem; again, Matthew and Luke diverge in their narratives. All we do know is that, ultimately, he does marry Mary when she falls pregnant without him and does what he can to protect her and her baby.

Joseph was well within his rights to break off his engagement to Mary. It is noble of him to want to do it quietly, so as not to create a stoushie, which could have led to Mary being stoned. To then accept the word of an angel, that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and marry her, is incredibly brave. For me, it suggests someone who already has a trust in God that goes beyond mere religiosity. After the child is born, and some strange visitors have brought intriguing gifts, Joseph again trusts a night-visiting angel and flees to Egypt. This will have been no mean feat and, whilst Joseph might have had "transferable skills" and been able to seek employment in Egypt, they would have remained refugees throughout their stay. Finally, even when it is safe to return, he cannot risk taking them back to Bethlehem, so they establish a new home much further north, in Nazareth.

Much else about Joseph is speculation: was he married before? Did he already have children or was he a perpetual virgin? How long did he live? And at what age did he die? We can theorise and speculate to our hearts' content, but it should not detract from what we have been told about Joseph in the Scriptures: he was a man who trusted God fully and implicitly, and who risked everything to protect the vulnerable Mary and Jesus. In many ways, there is nothing else we need know about him. May we give thanks for his virtues and seek to emulate them as best we can. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY SIX – PREGNANCY

Good morning everyone,

PREGNANCY is not something upon which I can claim expertise...then again, neither can any male Christian leader in history! So, what I offer today are my reflections as a woman looking-in on a story that has changes to women's bodies—changes outwith their control—as central to the plot.

According to Luke, Elizabeth and Mary both experience pregnancy for the first time. One woman is advanced in years; the other is possibly very young. Other than what women around them had told them, they had no idea what to expect. Even what they were told is only a guide: each woman and pregnancy is unique. No one can know before a pregnancy whether they will experience morning sickness, high blood pressure, swollen ankles, acid reflux, backache...or, indeed, whether they will carry their baby to term and deliver safely. It is a journey into the unknown every time, fraught with danger as well as excitement, anxiety as well as awe. Each and every woman who embarks on this journey (intentionally or not) has my complete respect: I know I could not face the uncertainty of pregnancy and its impact upon my body.

Yet, even as I type, a little voice in my head is asking whether this is an appropriate reflection for our church media. Bodily changes, particularly those of women, are not something we mention in church, are they? We don't talk about menstruation or sex or pregnancy or miscarriage or breast-feeding, do we? One day, during my training, I was observing a nativity rehearsal. The girl who was playing Mary took the 'Jesus doll' and put it up her costume, ready to give birth when the moment came. It was promptly removed and placed under her chair instead. I understand the Sunday Club leader's position, I really do. However, until we start being honest about the messy, visceral nature of the Christmas story pregnancies, we will be stopping short of the wonder of the incarnation. Moreover, we will continue to deny the real-life experiences of women whose pregnancies are not clean and simple, consigning them, perhaps, to silence, shame, guilt and isolation. That's not why Jesus came. He came to offer us all life, whatever our circumstances and experiences, and to enter into our human world, without exception.

Each of us was carried by a woman on an uncertain journey. Some of us have carried another human being. Those truths are something to be marvelled upon at any time, but which take on a whole other dimension in Advent. May you know yourself held and blessed this day, Fee.



DAY SEVEN – BABY

Good morning to you all,

I might not have much experience of pregnancy, but I have held a BABY. Indeed, I have held a few babies in my life. Shockingly, I even seem to be relatively competent with them! I love talking to babies...about anything (honestly, anything, mostly complete drivel). I love interacting with them. I love watching their facial expressions and seeing the wonder in their eyes. It is something I have done fairly instinctively since my friends started having babies a number of years ago; yet it is only really in this past year that I have learned some of the science behind it.

Many people think babies cannot do very much: they eat, sleep, poop and cry, and that's about it, right? Wrong! Babies are amazing. From the moment of birth, babies are wired to seek connection with other human beings around them, primarily their mother and immediate family. This connection is by touch, eye-contact, sound, smell: anything that tells baby they are not alone. Why? Because, for a baby, connection equals safety. Connection means they are not alone, and that someone is around to try and keep them alive. By contrast, a lack of connection triggers their fear hormones, which keeps them on high alert, either to get a connection back or to do whatever else they can to stay alive. This makes some sense when we stop and think about it, but the real learning for me has been that the level of connection a baby feels in their first few years of life can affect the rest of their life: physical health, as well as emotional and social wellbeing.

I saw some of this learning in action as a volunteer chaplain in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. There, babies are kept alive in incubators and their bodies are incredibly delicate. But care for their immediate survival in this way restricts connection, which impacts long-term health and wellbeing. Where I was, parents were encouraged to talk to their babies as much as possible, and to touch them when it was safe to do so...even if just fingertip to fingertip. As the babies grew stronger, they were able to come out of the incubators for short periods of time and be held by their parents. Most moving for me was seeing new dads holding their babies up against bare chests, to maximise this sense of connection.

Every baby who is born is fragile and vulnerable, but also utterly amazing, and is learning at a mind-boggling speed. Science tells us that connection with other human beings is the single most important thing in that learning. How does that change the frame through which we glimpse the story of God coming to earth as a human baby? Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY EIGHT – SURPRISE

Good morning to you,

SURPRISE is the order of things in the nativity story. Each thing that happens is a surprise to someone: angels appearing, unplanned pregnancies, shepherd visitors, a king born outside a palace...the list goes on.

Surprises upset the apple cart. From unrequested breakfasts in bed to the appearance of long-lost relatives, surprises happen more often than we might think. And we often like watching people being surprised, although mostly 'good' surprises, like someone proposing or a child getting the gift they have longed for. The joy that comes after such moments of surprise remind us that isn't always mundane and predictable, which is a good thing to hold onto during our current times.

Furthermore, I am becoming convinced that surprises are important for personal and collective growth, and not just in the "with child" sense. To quote a well-known online source:* "Surprise represents the difference between expectations and reality, the gap between our assumptions and expectations about worldly events and the way that those events actually turn out. This gap can be deemed an important foundation on which new findings are based since surprises can make people aware of their ignorance. The acknowledgement of ignorance, in turn, can mean a window to new knowledge."

Whether you love surprises or loathe them, it is good to remember that God is a God of surprises: constantly upending our expectations and showing up in all the 'wrong' places. Thanks be to God! Fee.

*I quote Wikipedia not because of its academic rigour but because, in this case, I think it conveys a deep truth well.



DAY NINE – DREAMS

Morning salutations my friends,

Whether we remember them or not, all of us have DREAMS. They are one of the universal mysteries of the human existence: we all experience them, and we are all perplexed by them. Scientists have been working for decades to understand exactly what they are for, and mystics for millennia have been interpreting what they mean.

In the Bible, dreams are a not uncommon way for God to speak to people. In Matthew's Gospel, dreams are the favoured way for God to speak to Joseph and the Magi and it is their respective dreams that enable the narrative to move onto the next bit. But this raises (at least) 2 questions: how did they know the dreams were messages from God? And, does God ever speak to us in our dreams and, if God does, how do we know? I am not the person to answer these questions, but I can do some wondering about it with you...

If our dreams are a way for us to process things we have seen and felt throughout the day, or emotions we are carrying about the future, perhaps they can give us some insight we might otherwise miss in our conscious state? Could it be that our dreams allow us to notice deep truths about ourselves, or others, or our circumstances, that 21st century living wants us to bypass? What if what we notice in our dreams helps us make sense of things that are happening...could this be as true for Joseph and the Magi as it might be for us? For example, perhaps it was after a chat with Mary and Joseph, and a good rest, that the Magi realised—through their dreams—quite how weird was their interaction with Herod? As such, the wisest course of action was to head home on a different road...? Occasionally in our dreams, connections and clarification are found that we cannot grasp otherwise...there must be a reason we are encouraged to sleep on big decisions or difficult emotions!

I cannot give a definitive answer about when dreams come from God. However, if God is of love and truth, hope and peace, justice and joy, and our dreams lead us in that direction we are, at the very least, engaging in the work of God. And that is good enough for me. Blessings upon you all, Fee.



DAY TEN – JOY

Good morning everyone,

This week's Advent candle—the pink one—represents, amongst other things, JOY. This coming Sunday is also known as Gaudete Sunday, referencing the reading from Philippians that has seemed to follow me throughout coronavirus-time: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice!" Yet I have begun our opening prayer for this week thus: 'Joy; there doesn't seem to be much of that around this year'. So, what are we to make of joy this Advent and Christmas season?

When an angel appears to shepherds near Bethlehem, he says: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people". And the source of the joy? The arrival of the Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord. Before Jesus has yet done anything, his very presence is the source of great joy for all people. Why? Jesus has yet to preach or teach, perform miracles or overturn tables. Instead, it is Jesus's very presence on earth that is the source of joy: not a fleeting emotion but a deep-seated knowledge that God is present, God is with us, in all things we face.

Some, if not all Christians, can be bad for denying or rejecting negative emotions in themselves or others. We can tell ourselves or others that we shouldn't feel depressed or that we shouldn't grieve the death of a loved one who has 'gone to a better place'. This is not the purpose of Biblical joy and the coming of Jesus. Instead, Christians joy is a deep sense, a gift from the Spirit that we can cultivate, that reminds us of what God has done, what God has promised, and that God is with us now. We are not alone in anything we face—we are seen, loved and accompanied by God—and in that we know joy, even alongside deep distress. In this way, joy is an anchor in our soul that holds us firm and returns us to the deep truths of our faith: God entered our world and will forever be with us! This is the joy of Advent and Christmas.

Whatever you face today, and in the days ahead, I invite you to take a little time to notice the joy of your faith. We might not want to break open the bubbly, but we can rejoice in knowing we are loved. Fee.



DAY ELEVEN – CENSUS

Good morning everyone,

The place of today's word, CENSUS, in the birth narrative of Jesus is a little controversial. It appears in Luke's Gospel as the reason for Mary and Joseph being in Bethlehem, rather than Nazareth, when Jesus was born. However, factually, it does not make much sense when we try to reconcile dates, and read Luke's account alongside Matthew's. Then again, Luke and Matthew diverge in many nativity details anyway; nonetheless, it is upon the census that most people focus: perhaps because it is an external event that can be 'proved' or otherwise.

The Roman Republic, then Empire, used censuses throughout their history, primarily to keep track of the numbers of men available for military service and to collect appropriate sums in taxes. The head of the household, the paterfamilias, appeared before the censors to inform them of their family members and the value of their property, especially land, slaves, livestock and luxury items (e.g. jewellery). All this enabled the on-going administration of the Republic/Empire. So, to which census might Luke have been referring? We know that, in Judea, King Herod the Great died in 4BCE. His son-successor Herod Archelaus ruled for about a decade before being deposed by Rome in 6CE. It was then that Judea became a Roman province. Quirinius was made governor and it was he who decided to conduct a tax census of the area. It is believed that this is the census to which Luke is referring...although it happens 10 years after when Jesus was thought to be born, and at least that after Matthew's dating of the event. You can see why this is tricky!

There have been various attempts to reconcile the accounts, from the wrong Herod being named by Matthew to a not-otherwise-recorded census being conducted. Ultimately, however, I do not think it is a problem to leave these two accounts unreconciled. From the very start of the Bible, compilers have been OK with contradicting narratives sitting side-by-side (notice how the first two creation stories in Genesis contradict one another). Moreover, get a couple of people to remember something that happened a few decades ago and you only become suspicious if the recollections are identical! What I think is more interesting is Luke's inclusion of the census at all. For me, it highlights that the Jewish people were not free: they were part of a bigger Empire and had to follow Rome's laws, customs, etc. This makes Mary's song of justice and freedom all the more powerful, when it is heard against the backdrop of colonialism.

The place of facts and truth in our world are both important, but not always simultaneous. A census may give us numerical facts, but it is only by hearing the stories of people, do we uncover a deeper truth. May we all hold both in balance each and every day. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWELVE – JOURNEY

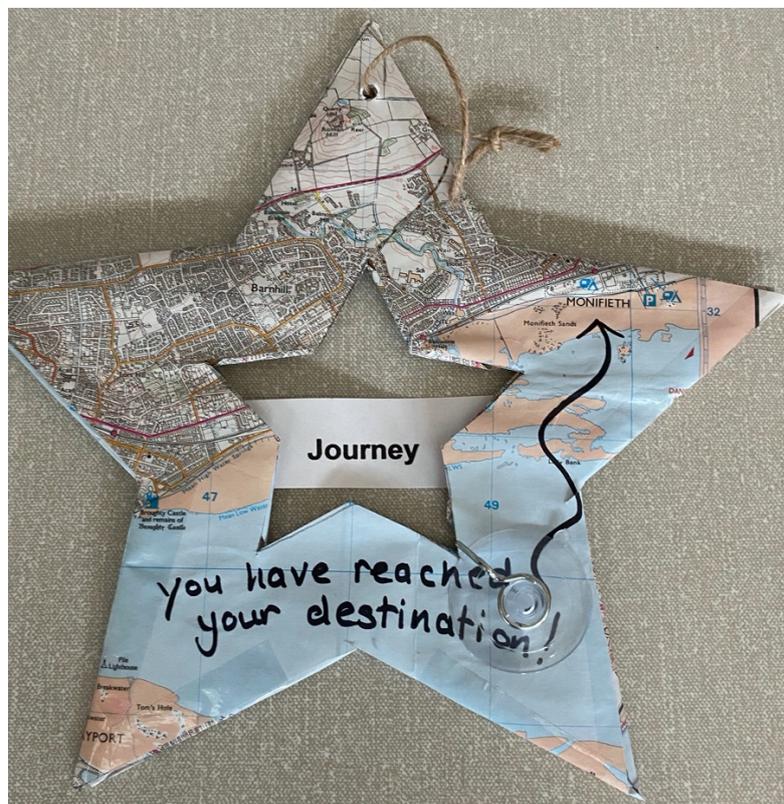
Greetings friends,

Most of the characters in our nativity story go on a JOURNEY, some more than once. All these physical journeys have a starting point and a destination, which we are told at least a little about, but the bit in-between—the actual journey itself—is somewhat glossed over. We cannot know the details, but we can think a little about the realities of first century travel.

Let's just take the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, as mentioned in Luke's Gospel. The distance is somewhere between 90 and 100 miles. Today, that journey might take 2-3 hours in a car (providing you can pass through checkpoints OK) or about 6-7 hours on a bus. No such motorised transportation was available to Mary and Joseph; they may have taken a donkey or similar animal with them, although the Bible does not mention one. So, they had to traverse approximately 100 miles of country, much of which is quite hilly (and I am not talking the rolling hills of Angus!), with wild animals to contend with along the way. Oh yes, and a heavily pregnant young woman. We do not know how long it would have taken them, although I imagine a week is a conservative estimate. A week of walking, across unpaved terrain, whilst already in the exhausted pain of late pregnancy: it is a lot to ask. I do not think I could do it unpregnant, never mind with child!

All this depicts a rather bleak, isolating time for Mary and Joseph. And whilst I do not want to downplay their efforts, I also want to suggest that they were probably not alone. I cannot imagine they were the only people heading south towards Bethlehem for a 'world-wide' census. When we walk with others, the distance seems shorter and we cover more than just miles. Furthermore, I do not think they would have been forced to camp out in the elements, at least not every night. The hospitality of the people of Israel/Palestine is astonishing, and all-encompassing. If a family could have provided even a little shelter and food for a pregnant, travelling woman, I have little doubt it would have been offered...and gratefully received.

Journeys today look very different from what they were just 100 years ago, never mind 2000. Few of us would want to return to going everywhere—no matter the distance—on foot. But we might have lost something in our haste to get from A to B. Is there a way to re-capture the companionship and hospitality of such long journeys today? Can we look for such things this Advent? Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY THIRTEEN – WAITING

Good morning to you all,

WAITING is not something many of us are particularly good at. In a speeded-up world, we can get frustrated if we are waiting for action, news or results for a second longer than we expect. I know I get frustrated when something on the computer takes any longer than about 3 seconds to do something; a far cry from the days of my teens and waiting an hour for a rather basic game to load up via my television! People of faith have known for millennia how hard waiting can be and have built-into their spiritual exercises times to practice waiting. Advent is just such a time.

We are asked to wait for three things: the birth of Jesus, marked in our tradition on 25th December; the birth of Jesus in our hearts and souls; and the second coming of Jesus to earth. But our waiting is to be more than just sitting, tapping our feet and checking our watches. It is to be an active, seeking, engaged waiting, that embodies both patience and hope. Not for us the lounging in a corner with our arms crossed waiting for Jesus to return and fix things in our world. Instead, we are to live-into the presence of Christ already here, engaging with the work of God's kingdom of justice and peace, fully expecting to meet Jesus already there. At the same time—and this is the really tricky bit—we are not to jump the gun. We are to mark each day of waiting, and longing, without celebrating too soon...a really tough ask in a commercialised country that pushes Christmas music, gifts and parties from the end of October and removes them on Boxing Day (when we Christians are supposed to be just really getting into our 12 days of festivities). In many ways, Advent has disappeared from our lives, but the practice of waiting—attentively, hopefully and faithfully—is even more important than ever.

If you find yourself struggling to wait in the days and weeks to come, pause for a moment and notice how you feel. What does waiting do to your body and mind? Can you sense a reason for this? And can you turn this waiting on its head? Either by placing it in a wider sense of humanity's waiting or by using the time to draw closer to God? Waiting can be painful; I pray you find a sense of hope in your Advent waiting this year. Fee.



DAY FOURTEEN – BETHLEHEM

Monday morning greetings to you all,

The birth of Jesus in the town of BETHLEHEM is one of the few things upon which Matthew and Luke agree, but what do we know about this place? It means 'House of Bread' in Hebrew and 'House of Meat' in Arabic, and has a history stretching back nearly 5 millennia. It is first mentioned in the Bible as the nearest place to which Rachel (wife of Jacob/Israel) was buried. Bethlehem goes on to be the place where Ruth and Boaz are married, where David is born and crowned the second King of Israel, and from where Micah predicts a great leader will rise. It is this link to the Davidic line and Micah's prophecy that makes it such an important part of the nativity story.

The name 'Bethlehem' ('House of Bread/Meat') suggests a place of abundance, but it has faced more than its fair share of conflict and violence, being destroyed and rebuilt more than once.

Today, located in the West Bank area of the Palestinian Occupied Territories, less than 10 miles south of Jerusalem, it is a far cry from the small, quiet, idyllic scene found on many a Christmas card. Abundance is not something the people of Bethlehem know, unless it is an abundance of poverty. Instead, it is home to (amongst other things) 3 refugee camps, established in 1948 as many Palestinians sought new homes, having had their land seized from under them. In the intervening 70+ years, generations of Palestinians have been born, lived and died as refugees in this town, waiting and hoping for peace in the Land of the Holy One. Between 1967 and 1995, Bethlehem was controlled by Israel, although the latter withdrawal of troops did not see peaceful streets for long. The early 00s saw more fighting and, today, the city is surrounded by by-pass roads for Israeli settlers and the Israeli West Bank barrier. This towering wall of concrete, topped with barbed wire and patrolled by military personnel, is a stark daily reminder that the people of Bethlehem are not free.

Seeing this wall during a visit in 2014 has left a lasting impression upon me. It is difficult to discern from satellite images on sites such as Google Maps but, if you are able, I urge you to go to street view. Find where Hebron Street and Manger Street meet, near the Aida Refugee Camp, and have a look from street level. This is the town into which the Prince of Peace was born. May it know lasting justice, peace and safety, and may it be soon.

Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY FIFTEEN – LOVE

Good morning everyone,

In a first year, 'Introduction to Christian Theology' lecture, the lecturer asked us to fill in the blank: "God is _____". That is the task of theology, answering that question. How would you fill in the blank? My immediate response was, and still is, LOVE. God is love. In many ways, it is that simple. Yet the ramifications are far from easy or straight-forward.

One of my favourite carols is "Love came down at Christmas", partly because I like the melody to which we sing it but mostly because of the sentiment behind it. The idea that divine love—complete, unflinching, unconditional—took human flesh is, for me, the utter marvel of the Christmas story. God's love lived our lives and struggles. God's love survived infant vulnerability and enjoyed eating and laughing, as well as facing down resentment and vitriol. God's love was not repelled by poverty or illness or disease or mistakes. God's love held those things that many of us run far from: held, saw, heard, understood, and blessed. That would not have been possible from afar. God's love became incarnate so we could more fully grasp the fullness of God's love. A love that is so immense, so indescribable, all we can do is acknowledge it and return to the source: God. It can become circular, but it remains the truth of Christmas.

Theology can only take us so far. Sometimes we must reach for art or poetry or song to express the inexpressible. So, in humility, I offer these words from another of my favourite hymns:

"Love is the light in the tunnel of pain,
"love is the will to be whole once again,
"love is the cure for the frightened and flawed,
"God is where love is for love is of God."

May you know the touch of God's love in your heart, soul, body and relationships. Fee.



DAY SIXTEEN – SHEPHERD(S)

Greetings to you all,

I find the SHEPHERDs in Luke's telling of the nativity really quite fascinating. They take up more verses than Joseph and we even have them speaking, something Luke's Joseph does not seem to do at all. These are significant characters in our story, a point not often appreciated by those chosen to wear tea-towels on their heads each December.

Shepherding is amongst the oldest of human occupations, quite separate from the role of farmer, and involves taking sheep across swathes of land to find pasture. Historically, shepherds rarely owned the sheep but were paid to look after another person's property, ensuring the animals ate well, stayed together, were protected from predators, and made it to market on time. Whilst the men who did this work tended to live apart from society, without wives or children due to their nomadic lifestyle, they were not solitary workers. They would often work in teams, either to look after a large flock or to pool their efforts across different flocks. They lived and slept with their sheep, leading and protecting them, and going wherever the sheep would best be fed.

Most of us understand the place of the shepherds in the nativity story as demonstrating that Jesus was born for everyone, and that God cared as much (if not more so) about those on the edges of society as those with power, wealth and privilege. It is an interpretation that sits well with Luke's inclusive and justice-seeking theology, spelt out for us in Mary's Magnificat just a few verses before. I do not dispute this approach, but I wonder if there is even more to ponder? The imagery of shepherds is used numerous times in the Hebrew scriptures as a metaphor for God, perhaps most famously in the 23rd Psalm: "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". There is also a link with King David, whose shepherding skills were put to spectacular use in slaying the Philistine, Goliath. Shepherds might have been outside society in some ways, but they were also representative of both the divine protection of God and the kingly line of David. All of these layers of meaning are important for grasping how significant is this moment in history, for Luke and for all of us.

Whether you consider yourself an outcast, at the top of the social ladder, or somewhere in between, TO YOU is born a Saviour, the Messiah. May that bring you excitement, hope and wonder this season, and always. Fee.



DAY SEVENTEEN – SHEEP

Good morning to you,

Technically speaking, the word SHEEP does not appear in our nativity story. Luke tells us about shepherds “keeping watch over their flock” and we make a reasonable assumption that the flock consists of sheep. Then again, no other non-human animal is mentioned even tangentially, be it donkey or cattle, so I thought we would wonder about sheep today.

Few of us would like to be compared to a sheep. There is a cultural assumption that sheep are unintelligent animals—somewhat refuted by scientific enquiry—and easily led. Indeed, in recent years the term “sheeple” has been coined to represent people acting only on the basis of what is trending or popular. No one wants to be seen as a sheeple; it is not a term of endearment. Yet, this disparaging use of sheep in our language glosses over our long history with a useful, and not completely stupid, animal.

It is thought that sheep were amongst the first animals domesticated when we moved from being hunter-gatherers to agriculturalists. We kept them for fleeces, meat, hide and, after a while, wool-for-spinning and milk as well. Today, there are hundreds, certainly over a thousand, sheep breeds in the world, many bred to support a specific agricultural need: wool, meat, milk, etc. Moreover, sheep have proven to be useful in other ways, such as being environmentally friendly herbicides and insecticides in certain crop fields, reducing the requirement to use chemicals. And whilst they do tend to follow their flock, this is a sign of them being social, rather than stupid, animals. Indeed, sheep exhibit signs of stress when they are isolated from their flock (sound familiar?!) All this is (I think) fascinating for our reading of the nativity story even before we consider of the rich history of sheep/lambs in the Hebrew Scriptures, or in later Christian theology which names Jesus, amongst other things, as the “Lamb of God”, the *Agnus Dei*.

Instead of resisting the label of ‘sheep’, perhaps we can wonder what we might learn from it? An animal that has strength in diversity. A social animal that sticks together when under threat. An animal that could help farm and produce foodstuffs more sustainably. An animal who helps people to rest, both in warmth and quietness of mind. Perhaps being a sheep is not so bad after all.

May you know your inner sheep this day. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY EIGHTEEN – ANGELS

Friday salutations everyone,

ANGELS are a recurring theme in our nativity story, both for Luke and Matthew. I have already waxed lyrical about Gabriel specifically, so today I am going to focus on angels in a more general sense and, particularly, as they appear to the shepherds (and sheep!) in Luke.

The word 'angel' literally means 'messenger' and this is what many of the angels depicted throughout the Christian Scriptures seem to do: bring messages from God to human beings. This is what the first angel to appear to the shepherds is doing: he is letting them know "good news of great joy", namely that the Messiah has been born. But angels seem to do more than just vocalise God's messages. They interact with human beings in a physical sense as well: wrestling with Jacob, feeding Elijah, touching Isaiah's lips with hot coals. Angels also attend to God, sing praises to God and help God defeat God's enemies. And this is where I learnt something completely new (apologies if what I am about to share is obvious to you!). The "Lord of hosts" seems to mean that God is the 'Lord of the heavenly host' (which I had grasped) but that 'the heavenly host' were the armies of angels. Armies; as in violence. That, I had not quite appreciated before. It now feels a bit weird to me that the birth of the Prince of Peace was sung about by a sky-full of angel warriors! Anyway, be they fighting angels or defensive angels or something else entirely, a whole multitude of angels sang praises to God. The sky was filled, and "glory of the Lord shone" all around. What a spectacular sight! That could not have been achieved by just one or two angels...it needed lots. Coming together, singing together, praising together, lighting up the sky together. These angels, in my mind, become greater than the sum of their parts. Whilst we might not want to emulate their militaristic tendencies, in pursuit of a non-violent path of Christian witness, this truth of pointing to something greater than ourselves...being something greater than ourselves...remains a powerful lesson. Particularly today.

You are never a lone voice. And you are never alone. Join in with angels and human beings alike, proclaiming good news of great joy and singing praises to God. Blessings, Fee.



DAY NINETEEN – CHORUS

Good morning everyone,

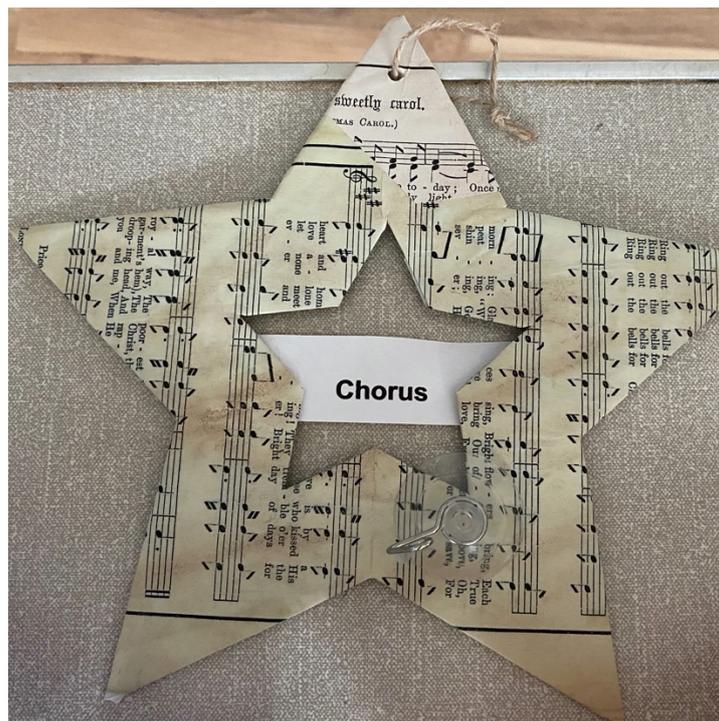
Following on from yesterday's singing angels, I am thinking about CHORUS today...in the sense of a group of people singing rather than the refrain of a song. It is a bitter-sweet reflection as communal singing has largely left our lives in 2020, with singing becoming more of a solo affair, or something done only with families or via screens. I give thanks for all those who have helped us to keep singing in some way, shape or form this year; their efforts have been a balm for our souls and brought joy to our hearts.

Music in general, not just singing, helps with brain function and memory-recall. Almost all of us have experienced a 'flash-back' sensation when we hear a particular piece of music: for example, Blondie's "Maria" transports me straight back to sixth year in school. We now know, through a wealth of research, that singing (particularly group singing) does even more for us than just bring back memories. It is outright good for us. Physically, singing lowers our blood pressure, boosts the immune system, and can be a bit of a work-out (particularly, but not exclusively, if you start adding in movement, such as dance or Makaton). Emotionally, we are rewarded by the release of feel-good hormones and, especially for children and young ones, there are educational benefits in terms of working together, counting, listening, etc. Perhaps most important of all, though—and the bit we have most missed this year—is the social and spiritual impacts of singing with others.

Bonds are built through singing and we become part of something larger. For those of us who sing in church, the connection with those around us—and with all those who have sung those words before—might not be visible but it is astonishingly powerful. Then, when we join in with angels and direct our singing to God, a whole other dimension is opened up as well.

Even when we do not join in, the impact of human voices singing individually or in unison/harmony is physical, emotional and spiritual: Welsh male voice choirs are renowned for raising the hairs on the back of countless necks! Earlier this year, I was deeply moved listening to a Rabbi lead Rosh Hashanah worship online. I did not know the liturgy and could only pick out a few very basic words and phrases in Hebrew, but in listening to her voice I felt a sense of worship...a sense of connection with God. I cannot explain it; I only know it happened. Our human connection to God through singing is not to be underestimated; a truth the angels knew well.

So, if you have not sung for a while, I urge you to do so today. Either sing as you go about your daily life or join in with something on the radio, television or online (there are plenty of MPC services to choose from!). But sing. Lament the inability to sing with others but give thanks that we can still connect through the music and words themselves. Thanks be to God! Fee.



SUNDAY 20 DECEMEBER – ADDITIONAL REFLECTION

Hello there everyone,

I want to offer a wee acknowledgement that emotions will be raw today. Even for those of us who had planned for (even relished, perhaps?) a quiet Christmas, the news that we are to enter Level Four from Boxing Day is an unexpected blow. If you had planned to see loved ones this week--some of whom you might not have seen at all this year--the disappointment will be deep and devastating.

I have learnt this morning, via the indomitable Dr Suzanne Zeedyk, that disappointment is a hugely powerful emotion at the best of times. Expecting someone to wave and say hello as they pass you, and it does not happen for some reason? Disappointment. The greater the stakes, the deeper the disappointment. Our expectations have been raised and the stakes were high this Christmas period...no wonder we are hurting. If you have a look at her Facebook page or Twitter account there are links to interesting, helpful articles to tell you more. But, for now, I offer this:

- Today is a tough day: it is OK to feel it.
- Name your disappointment as such.
- Acknowledge exactly what expectations you have lost.
- Breathe.
- Share your feelings with others.
- Do something that can help you feel better...particularly if it might help you laugh.
- Remember to breathe.
- Start to wonder if at least some of your expectations might be met in another way (it is OK if you cannot do this for a few days).
- We will get through this.
- Breathe.

Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWENTY – SILENCE

Sunday salutations, my friends,

How many of you are comfortable with SILENCE? Is it bearable when you are by yourself or must you have a radio/TV/music/book on in the background? What about when you are with someone else or in a group, can you maintain silence or are you driven to fill it? When I was at uni, there were a few of us who felt awkward if there were more than a few seconds silence after the tutor asked something of the class...I do not know whether everyone else loved us for filling the void or hated us for dominating the air space!

Silence is golden in some situations. If we need a break or a rest, silence can be soothing. But, for a lot of the time, for lots of us, we can find prolonged silence uncomfortable (and, believe me, if you have a Dachshund and she goes silent, that is most worrying indeed!). Why is that? Is it because we do not want to hear what might be going on in our heads and hearts? Will silence force to the surface things we have kept buried for too long? What would be the consequences of letting those things surface?

What about silence when we are with others? Often, when people know each other well, comfortable silences can be a natural part of the relationship: nothing needs to be said when time is spent with loved ones. But, at other times, we feel compelled to say something when silence may be more appropriate. Sometimes there are no words to counter a difficult (or, indeed, joyful) disclosure. We often want to offer words of sympathy, solitude or hope, but there are often no words. Those are tough silences, but our body language is probably more powerful than anything we might try to say. Likewise, we may want to fill a gap in a story someone is stutteringly telling us when actually what they need is time, space and silence to process thoughts and formulate their words. Profound listening needs open silence, and open silence needs deep courage to hold it. Silence is a rare thing in our ever-connected world, but it can be the gateway to profound understanding, for ourselves and others. May we treasure silence when we need it and offer it when it is appropriate. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-ONE – HOPE

Hello everyone,

The power of HOPE in our lives is massive. It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of hope in our daily living and our life-planning. When we lose hope, we can really struggle to find the will to do anything, even live. It really is that fundamental.

There are, I think, different layers of hope, some of which is related to the (unscheduled) reflection I offered yesterday on disappointment. Hope and disappointment can be linked, especially when our hope is specific. If we hope to achieve a specific thing or get the test results we want, a different outcome produces disappointment. The bigger and more influential the hope, the greater the resultant disappointment if that hope is dashed. From that point of view, advice such as “don’t get your hopes up” or “don’t count your chickens” is wise. If we reduce our expectations, we reduce the likelihood and/or impact of disappointment. But hope is also motivating. If we hope to pass our driving test, we are more likely to put in lots of practice. If we hope for better lives for children, we do what we can to build relationships with them. Coupled to a dream or a vision of something better, hope can be the fuel that gets us there.

Putting these two ideas together helps us understand hope in difficult circumstances. If we make our hopes too specific in tough times (e.g. ‘everything will be fine in a fortnight’) we are leaving ourselves open to repeated disappointment. And that is hard to weather on an ongoing basis. On the other hand, we need some hope that things will get easier at some point so that we keep going from day to day. Where do we find such hope? Hope that is both real and yet loosely defined? For many people, it is in creation around us. The turning of the earth, the rising of the sun, the rhythm of the seasons, the kind acts of others. Being in awe of something bigger—be it the wonders of a godless cosmos or the infinite love of a Creator God—helps us lift our eyes and have hope for tomorrow, even a better tomorrow. And, when things hit rock bottom and we cannot find an ounce of hope in our souls, that is when the community around us steps in. In the church, one of the greatest gifts we give one another is holding onto hope for those who cannot find it.

Witnessing to the hope of creation, incarnation and resurrection when our sisters and brothers in Christ have lost all hope. Deep hope is a communal activity and, in that sense, can never truly be lost.

Whether you are full of hope or had your hopes dashed, know that you are not alone. When you can, hold hope for others. When you cannot, know others are holding hope for you. Thanks be to God! Fee.



DAY TWENTY-TWO – WONDER

Greetings everyone,

Our word for today, WONDER, is not one that is really prominent in the Christmas narratives (I did a search!) As such, I am now not entirely sure why I first included it in our list of words! There will have been a reason at the time, but I cannot recollect it just now. However, I think it is a good word to include, even if my reasons now are not the same as they were back in October!!

For me, wonder has two broad meanings, both of which can be found throughout the nativity stories, whether or not the actual word is used. There is the sense of wonder akin to awe, which must have been felt by so many of our characters: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, magi...everyone. Everyone except, perhaps, the angels, who were probably a key source of awe and wonder for the others. This kind of wonder comes from outside us, washing over us like a wave of joy, amazement, and gobsmacked-ness. Something we had not considered before or had only seen in one way, takes us by surprise and we are both filled with good feelings and, somehow simultaneously, taken outside of ourselves. When was the last time you felt such wonder? And what was the source? Perhaps a sunset, or a sky full of stars, or the birth of a child, or the unexpectedly kind actions of another? This is a sense to be treasured, for it gives us moments of magic in our lives.

The other meaning of wonder is more akin to curiosity. In Godly Play practice, we use the phrase “I wonder...” a lot. “I wonder what part of this story you liked the best...?” “I wonder if the sower has a name...?” This kind of wondering does occur in the nativity story, when the people waiting outside the Temple wonder what is taking Zechariah so long. I wonder what theories they came up with?! Such wondering is important, not just for advancement of human lives (so many discoveries will have begun with “I wonder what would happen if...?”) but, I would argue, for our souls. What happens when we stop wondering? As humans, we start to lose our empathy. We stop seeking to understand other points of view, becoming entrenched in our own. It becomes impossible to have compassion, leading to division, polarisation and unhealthy competition. Spending time wondering—thinking what it might be like to ‘walk a mile in another’s shoes’—nurtures our humanity and brings us closer to God.

We cannot conjure-up the first sense of wonder, but we can cultivate the second. I have a theory that such cultivation might allow the first sense of wonder to be experienced more readily. For our hearing of the Christmas story, a story we have heard countless times before, that might not be a bad thing. May your festive wondering allow you to re-discover the wonder of God-with-us, Emmanuel. Fee.



DAY TWENTY-THREE – MANGER

Good morning to you all,

Much of what we see in nativity plays is based on the story in the Bible, but with certain parts interpreted in specific ways. The verse that has invited most (mis?) interpretation is Luke 2:7: “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a MANGER, because there was no place for them in the inn”. Our understanding of what this verse means for Jesus’s birth is coloured by the word-choice of translators and our own cultural understandings. Let’s explore further...

A manger is an animal feeding trough, usually made of stone. We assume that such feeding troughs would be away from living quarters as we are used to seeing them in fields or cow sheds or stables. That is not necessarily the case. In first century Bethlehem, most families would have kept their small number of animals in an area of their house, either on the ground floor or in a cave-like section under the house. A stable is not mentioned in the Bible: we infer one from the word “manger”; however, it is unlikely that Mary and Joseph were banished to an outhouse somewhere.

Our assumptions are further solidified by the use of the word “inn”. We envisage a travel-weary couple knocking on the doors of hostelries, being turned away because everywhere is full. For those of us who have travelled aimlessly around Scotland in the summer months, the anxiety of not finding a bed for the night with so many ‘no vacancies’ signs around is real, and relatable! Yet the word translated as “inn” here is translated each other time in the Bible as “guest-room”. Many homes had an upper room that was given over to guests when required (the same kind of ‘upper/guest room’ in which, according to Luke, Jesus shared his final meal with his disciples). Furthermore, given that Joseph was travelling to his ancestral home, it is highly likely that he knew people in Bethlehem who could put a roof over his and Mary’s heads. Altogether, then, the likely scenario is that Mary and Joseph were staying with family when Jesus was born although, because the house was full, they were mucking-in with their hosts and using every available space as best they could.

What do we lose when we remove inn-keepers and stables from our Christmas story? What do we gain when we think of a house filled with family for Jesus’s birth? And what might the animals have thought when they found a baby in the place where they usually ate their food?!

May Jesus find a home in your hearts this Advent and Christmas, whatever your family arrangements are this year. Fee.



DAY TWENTY-FOUR – STAR

Christmas Eve greetings to you all,

The STAR in the nativity story has been the inspiration behind our Advent-Christmas-Epiphany journey, where we have adorned our church windows with amazing star creations (sincerest thanks to Mari E) and invited everyone else to add stars to their own windows. My dining room window is rather full now—I may have gone slightly OTT! If you have yet to make a star and put it in your window, I encourage you to have a go ☺

Sometimes referred to as 'The Star of Bethlehem' or 'The Christmas Star', the star which guides the Magi to the infant Jesus only appears in Matthew's Gospel. This celestial 'character' has inspired debate from the earliest of times, with many people—stargazers, theologians, astronomers, historians and lay-people alike—all trying to work out what caused this particular and unique star to appear. There have been suggestions ranging from comets to supernovas to planetary alignments, like we have just had between Jupiter and Saturn. Data have been tabulated, television programmes have been aired, and planetariums have created shows for visitors. There is little consensus, not least because dating the various phenomenon which might explain the star does not correlate with the narrative dating of Matthew's Gospel. But still, we search and we wonder and we try to explain. Why is that?

I think it might be one (or both) of two things. First of all, stars are fascinating. Even if you know nothing about them and cannot tell a sun-star from a bright-planet (guilty as charged), stars are fascinating. They inspire wonder and awe in us that few other things can. They invite us to consider life and existence 'out there' in the rest of the universe, even if the stars we see are only those which are also in the Milky Way...billions more are beyond our ken. Moreover, they are always there...every night...and when the Scottish clouds move off, the sight is wonderful. Which brings me to my second thing. Of all the details in the Bible about the birth of Jesus, the star is the one thing we can relate to, here and now (other than, perhaps, sheep!). I have not seen an angel. The only virgin births of which I am aware required IVF. I have been to Bethlehem but I am not convinced I have seen the *actual spot* where Jesus was born. But I have gazed at the stars. In them, I have a point of connection with this ancient story. I, too, have seen shooting stars and other celestial events, and been enthralled. The star—indeed, all the stars—unite us through time and space with this story in a way little else does.

Whilst I find the speculations around the Star of Bethlehem interesting, I do not need a scientific explanation. I already know the power of the stars on my heart and soul. Maybe that can be enough this Christmas. Peace be with you this day, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-FIVE – JESUS

Christmas tidings of peace and joy to you and yours!

Here we are: we have made it to Christmas Day, when we mark the birth of JESUS and all it means for humanity. Unlike some of the other daily words, there is far too much I could say about Jesus...in fact, I would not be surprised if more words have been written about Jesus than just about any other person or thing in history. So, I am just going to share what is in my heart this morning.

The carol earworm I have today (mostly because of the refrain “Christ is born today!”) is, traditionally, known as “Good Christian men rejoice”. Only, I do not like the traditional opening line. Like too many hymns and carols it is both male-orientated and what I like to call pious-shaming (another example is the idea from “Away in a manger” that Jesus did not cry and so, by extension, good Christian children should not cry either; both are nonsense!). So, I have changed the first line of the carol to “All Christians now rejoice!” Why? Because Jesus was not born just for men and he certainly was not only about ‘good Christians’. Jesus was born for all of us. Every. Single. Person. Our gender, our age, our wealth, our sexuality, our goodness...none of that, ultimately, matters, for TO YOU is born a child, the Messiah. Just as you are, whoever you are. Today’s star, in its multicolour splendour, represents something of that truth.

Whatever you do today, whomever you spend it with, know that you need neither be a man nor ‘good’ to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Celebrate it just as you are and, from there, may you come to know the transcendent, transforming peace and love of God. Fee.



DAY TWENTY-SIX – WORSHIP

A Happy St Stephen's Day to you all,

When I tell stories in schools, particularly to younger children, they are full of questions. And I love it...except when the answer is not easy to put into words! One such question, which I am asked fairly regularly, is "what does 'worship' mean?" Now, I can tell you how we 'do' worship in the Church of Scotland, in our own congregation, and in some other denominations. I can also tell you a little about Jewish worship practices, and even less about Islamic worship. But coming to a generic definition is really tricky. So, for today, let's be specific!

In Matthew's Gospel we are told that, when the Magi arrive and see Jesus, they worship him. One translation says, "they knelt down and paid him homage" and another says, "they fell down and worshipped him". The tone in translations is quite different. One suggests quite a stately, regal affair, which you might see on a period drama when characters meet the British monarch. The other seems much more heart-felt and spontaneous, as though the Magi are overcome with awe. Both are linguistically correct, but it does invite us to consider how we worship God. Furthermore, the actions of the shepherds are slightly different again. There is nothing in Luke's narrative to suggest that the shepherds worship or pay homage to Jesus, but their return to the fields is accompanied by them "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen". There is no disputing the translation of Luke here, and the sense of their actions is undoubtedly joyful: God has done something truly wonderful and they cannot help but acknowledge it.

In what ways do you worship God? Do you worship other things or people? Is there a difference? These are not always questions we think about but, as we contemplate the worship and praising of others, perhaps we can reflect on our own worship. Peace be with you this day, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-SEVEN – PONDER

Good morning everyone,

Luke says that, when the shepherds tell Mary and Joseph about the angels, “Mary treasured all these words and PONDERed them in her heart”. What I love about this phrase is that Mary pondered in her heart, not her head, and it is not worry or rumination. Unlike the relentless self-chatter inside our heads, of which many of us weary, Mary’s pondering was deep in the very essence of her being. Her pondering was prayer, not anxiety.

So much of our life in the 21st century is in our heads. Thinking and being critical is not a bad thing (I often worry we do not think enough, but that is a whole other reflection!); however, it is not good for us to spend too long ‘in our heads’. It is easy to forget, even in this season of celebrating the incarnation of God, that we are creatures of flesh, blood and bone, and not just brains in a jar on a shelf. Our experience of the world around us—and of the God who creates and sustains this world—is as much through our body as our brain. Indeed, when anxiety hits our brains, we are encouraged to use our 5 senses to ‘ground’ ourselves back in the physical, here-and-now, world. But how often do we spend time noticing our body? How often do we shift our focus from our head down into our heart, our guts, our soul? I know I do not do it nearly often enough. Yet, when I do intentionally seek to open my heart and soul to God—to ponder what is going on in my life and the world around me—I meet with God in a way that rarely happens in my brain alone.

The Greek word that is translated as “ponder” in Luke 2:19 conveys a sense of ‘bringing together’, of ‘conversing’. It might be, then, that Mary brought together all that she had seen, experienced and heard over the previous days and months, and held it all in her heart...making connections...and conversing with God. That, for me, is a beautiful image and an example for us all, if only we can get out of our heads for a bit!

May you experience a time of pondering this Christmas-tide and may God meet you and bless you there, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-EIGHT – SAVIOUR

A very good morning to you all,

When the angel appears to the shepherds he says, “to you is born this day in the city of David a SAVIOUR, who is the Messiah, the Lord”. Three titles are given to the new-born child in the space of one phrase: Saviour, Messiah and Lord. Whilst I now wish I had opted for ‘Messiah’ when selecting words to reflect upon, we have ‘Saviour’ instead. Of all the words we are considering over Advent and Christmas, this is perhaps the trickiest to pin-down...at least without getting myself in trouble! You see, the nature of Jesus as our Saviour and the saving work of Jesus’s birth, life, death and resurrection, is one of the most contentious areas of Christian theology, having led to many schisms and the death/expulsion of so-called heretics. Moreover, it has become part of the Christian jargon which often trips off our tongues without us really thinking about it, e.g. “I am saved by Jesus” or “Jesus saves me from my sins”. These are deep waters indeed, and if you want to read a little more, please get in touch and I will share some literature with you; but, for today, I want to contextualise the words of the angel in the Gospel of Luke.

Earlier in Luke, when Mary praises God, in what has become known as ‘The Magnificat’, she says, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour”. Mary understands God to be her saviour. She has been told she is carrying the Son of God and yet she considers God to be her saviour, not her child. Why? Perhaps, as Mary goes on to say, because God is already known to be merciful, strong and faithful, in favour of true justice for the poor and oppressed.

Human beings need not be saved from a grudge-carrying God, so why do we need Jesus as Saviour, also? Well, I suppose that depends on what you think you/humanity/the cosmos need saving from.... God works hard throughout history to maintain God’s relationship with humankind and encourage us to live well together. But, without something completely concrete, it was always going to be an uphill struggle. As such, for me, the incarnation is as important in the saving work of Jesus as his death and resurrection. It is the moment when God is no longer distant and we are ‘saved’ from the gulf between divinity and humanity...a gulf only God, not humans, can bridge. We are ‘saved’ from the myth that we are alone or uncared-for or forgotten. We are also ‘saved’ from our selfish side, being reminded that we are created for relationship, with God and one another, and that no person is more or less worthy than any other. It is the moment when we realise, once and for all, that God sees, knows and understands the struggle of the human condition and meets us right there.

Jesus can save us in so many ways. There may well be a cosmic, eternal angle to this as well, but we are unlikely to know for sure this side of the grave. So let us focus on what we need to be ‘saved’ from today and invite God, through the words of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, to meet us there...and throw us a life-line. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-SEVEN – PONDER

Good morning everyone,

Luke says that, when the shepherds tell Mary and Joseph about the angels, “Mary treasured all these words and PONDERed them in her heart”. What I love about this phrase is that Mary pondered in her heart, not her head, and it is not worry or rumination. Unlike the relentless self-chatter inside our heads, of which many of us weary, Mary’s pondering was deep in the very essence of her being. Her pondering was prayer, not anxiety.

So much of our life in the 21st century is in our heads. Thinking and being critical is not a bad thing (I often worry we do not think enough, but that is a whole other reflection!); however, it is not good for us to spend too long ‘in our heads’. It is easy to forget, even in this season of celebrating the incarnation of God, that we are creatures of flesh, blood and bone, and not just brains in a jar on a shelf. Our experience of the world around us—and of the God who creates and sustains this world—is as much through our body as our brain. Indeed, when anxiety hits our brains, we are encouraged to use our 5 senses to ‘ground’ ourselves back in the physical, here-and-now, world. But how often do we spend time noticing our body? How often do we shift our focus from our head down into our heart, our guts, our soul? I know I do not do it nearly often enough. Yet, when I do intentionally seek to open my heart and soul to God—to ponder what is going on in my life and the world around me—I meet with God in a way that rarely happens in my brain alone. The Greek word that is translated as “ponder” in Luke 2:19 conveys a sense of ‘bringing together’, of ‘conversing’. It might be, then, that Mary brought together all that she had seen, experienced and heard over the previous days and months, and held it all in her heart...making connections...and conversing with God. That, for me, is a beautiful image and an example for us all, if only we can get out of our heads for a bit!

May you experience a time of pondering this Christmas-tide and may God meet you and bless you there, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-EIGHT – SAVIOUR

A very good morning to you all,

When the angel appears to the shepherds he says, “to you is born this day in the city of David a SAVIOUR, who is the Messiah, the Lord”. Three titles are given to the new-born child in the space of one phrase: Saviour, Messiah and Lord. Whilst I now wish I had opted for ‘Messiah’ when selecting words to reflect upon, we have ‘Saviour’ instead. Of all the words we are considering over Advent and Christmas, this is perhaps the trickiest to pin-down...at least without getting myself in trouble! You see, the nature of Jesus as our Saviour and the saving work of Jesus’s birth, life, death and resurrection, is one of the most contentious areas of Christian theology, having led to many schisms and the death/expulsion of so-called heretics. Moreover, it has become part of the Christian jargon which often trips off our tongues without us really thinking about it, e.g. “I am saved by Jesus” or “Jesus saves me from my sins”. These are deep waters indeed, and if you want to read a little more, please get in touch and I will share some literature with you; but, for today, I want to contextualise the words of the angel in the Gospel of Luke.

Earlier in Luke, when Mary praises God, in what has become known as ‘The Magnificat’, she says, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour”. Mary understands God to be her saviour. She has been told she is carrying the Son of God and yet she considers God to be her saviour, not her child. Why? Perhaps, as Mary goes on to say, because God is already known to be merciful, strong and faithful, in favour of true justice for the poor and oppressed. Human beings need not be saved from a grudge-carrying God, so why do we need Jesus as Saviour, also? Well, I suppose that depends on what you think you/humanity/the cosmos need saving from.... God works hard throughout history to maintain God’s relationship with humankind and encourage us to live well together. But, without something completely concrete, it was always going to be an uphill struggle. As such, for me, the incarnation is as important in the saving work of Jesus as his death and resurrection. It is the moment when God is no longer distant and we are ‘saved’ from the gulf between divinity and humanity...a gulf only God, not humans, can bridge. We are ‘saved’ from the myth that we are alone or uncared-for or forgotten. We are also ‘saved’ from our selfish side, being reminded that we are created for relationship, with God and one another, and that no person is more or less worthy than any other. It is the moment when we realise, once and for all, that God sees, knows and understands the struggle of the human condition and meets us right there.

Jesus can save us in so many ways. There may well be a cosmic, eternal angle to this as well, but we are unlikely to know for sure this side of the grave. So let us focus on what we need to be ‘saved’ from today and invite God, through the words of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, to meet us there...and throw us a life-line. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-NINE – MESSENGER

Good morning to you all,

We have thought about angels a couple of times, so you may be fed up with me telling you that the word 'angel' means 'MESSENGER'. However, today I want to talk not about the angels that come from God but the messengers who become earth-angels, spreading God's good news amongst their fellow human beings.

For, you see, the message from God did not stop in our nativity story whenever it reached the first human. Zechariah passed the message onto Elizabeth, then others. Mary shared with Elizabeth; Joseph shared with Mary. Most powerfully, the shepherds shared the message, first with Mary and Joseph, and then all who would listen...and all who listened were amazed. If they were amazed, do you think those people would have kept quiet about it? Absolutely not! And so, the network of messengers continued. It continues to this day.

We have all met angels as messengers in our lives; we would not be Christians without them. God's good news is not meant to be a carefully guarded secret. Whilst we might not feel comfortable shouting it from the rooftops, we are called to pass it on. We are called to be God's messengers on earth. We are called to be earth-angels.

My invitation to you, then, is to be alert for times when you can be God's messenger. It need not be a big thing; indeed, the story of faith is usually passed on in small and repeated acts of faith, hope and love. But be alert and embrace the opportunity to share why you have faith. Not to foist your beliefs on someone else but to share the good news of God's love for all. For that is, I think, the best news we can hear. Fee.



DAY THIRTY – LIGHT

Hello everyone,

One of the most powerful statements heard during the Christmas period is from John's Gospel: "The LIGHT shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it". In fact, scratch that: it is one of the most powerful statements in the whole of Christian scripture. The idea that nothing can overcome the love and truth of God—that even the death of Jesus at human hands does not eradicate God—is something upon which many of us base our faith and hope, and all we do in God's name. And yet, this phrase has come to have a problematic edge for me: what is wrong with the dark?!

Those of us fortunate enough to have sight know that light is important in order to see. Without lights in our homes or cars, we would have many more accidents than we already do. As such, an element of anxiety or fear can come with the absence of light: if we are used to navigating the world by our eyes, not being able to trust them is hard. I am also one of those people who struggles with positivity and motivation during the months of December and January when the hours of daylight in Scotland are fewer. The absence of light has an emotional as well as physical impact on me. However, when I am trying to sleep, light is not my friend. We have a couple of wee shrimp tanks in our bedroom and, if I want to sleep before the tanks' sunset time, I get grumpy. Without darkness, I struggle to rest well: something we all need. Think about all the times and places when the absence of light was creative or nurturing: in from which God spoke in Genesis 1.

One of the challenges of 21st century Christianity is to sit with nuance and not push metaphors too far. There is spiritual hope in John 1:5 but we should not seek to eradicate darkness. Moreover, at a time when many of us are becoming more aware of the ingrained nature of racism in our societal structures, language and culture, associating light with good and dark with evil is hugely problematic. So, in hearing these words of John, let us celebrate the hope of God's love, that can never be erased, without taking that same hope and love out of the lives of others.

Peace with you, Fee.



DAY THIRTY-ONE – PEACE

Hogmanay greetings to you all,

I am going to go pop-culture on you today! In the film “Miss Congeniality”, Sandra Bullock stars as an FBI Special Agent who goes undercover at the Miss United States beauty pageant. There is a bit during the competition when the compere (Stan) asks the contestants, “What is the one most important thing our society needs?” All the contestants reply, “World PEACE”. Then, when Bullock’s character is asked, she responds, “That would be harsher punishment for parole violators, Stan.” At this point, everyone goes silent. Stan looks unnerved and everyone in the audience is looking at her either blankly or aghast. After a good few seconds, she adds, “And...world peace,” at which point the entire audience erupts into cheers and applause.

There are few of us who would argue world peace is a bad aspiration except, perhaps, those who work in the arms trade or those who have seen the episode of “The Simpsons” when the achievement of world peace means human beings became ripe for alien attack! However, the ‘peace’ spoken of in the Bible—‘shalom’ in Hebrew and ‘eirene’ in Greek—is more than the absence of violence. It is more like wholeness and flourishing that comes through justice, restoration and divine transformation. It is something we humans can (and should) work towards but it is, ultimately, a gift from God. As such, I struggle with this translation of the angels’ song in Luke 2:14: “Glory to God in the highest and, on earth, peace to those with whom God is pleased”. Peace is only true peace when it encompasses everyone, not just some. Then we get into the murky waters of discerning (as if we ever could) which of us have pleased God! Such use of energy only serves to divide us further and is never going to bring about peace! So, what to do? Well, I am no Greek scholar, but I would like to play around with the words a little, so they are more reflective of God from the beginning of Scripture. How does this sound? “Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! God delights in God’s people!” The love of God, which brings Jesus amongst us, and the delight God has in God’s creation is, and can be, the very foundations upon which we can build true and lasting peace.

May the peace, love and delight of God be what unites us in the year to come. Blessings,
Fee.



DAY THIRTY-TWO – HEROD

Hello, and welcome to 2021!

As we continue into the final week of our 'Follow the Star' journey, we return to Matthew's narrative of the nativity as we are drawn ever-onwards towards Epiphany. It is he, alone, who mentions today's character, HEROD: the self-titled king of the Jews. No wonder he got upset when people came searching for "the child who has been born king of the Jews"! Whilst the actions accredited to him by Matthew—including the instruction to slaughter all children 2 years and younger in/around Bethlehem—are historically uncorroborated, few deny that Matthew accurately captured Herod's character.

Herod was a rather wily and self-serving politician. Born in 73 BCE, he spent his life using relations and contacts to gain then maintain power, starting by riding on the coattails of his Edomite father, Antipater. Antipater was granted Roman citizenship whilst a courtier in Judaea and went on to ensure Herod was appointed as the governor of Galilee. Through various manoeuvrings, bloodshed and marriages of convenience, Herod eventually became the sole ruler of Judaea. He assumed the title of 'basileus', the highest possible title, akin to 'king' or 'emperor'. He was not always popular with either the Jewish populace nor the Jewish authorities, not least because he was not a Jew himself. Moreover, Herod's appointment shifted Judaea's status from an independent Jewish kingdom to a Roman vassal. In a bid to maintain a solid power base, he tried to 'buy' allegiance from the people by embarking upon a huge building campaign: markets, amphitheatres, ports and, most significantly of all, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. His reign ended in terror with the burning alive of Jewish men who tried to remove what they considered idols from the Temple, as well as the execution of 2 of his sons. When he finally died in 4 BCE, of a rather unpleasant disease, his accumulated kingdom was divided between 3 of his sons, at his request. No one would again reign over the same land as he did, not even his heirs.

Herod is both an historical figure and a literary. Matthew might have used artistic licence to emphasis a likeness between his rule and that of the Pharaoh's whilst Israel was enslaved in Egypt, but there is a thread of truth in his depiction. Herod was a man who lusted after power and who would do anything to keep it for himself. He is someone we should continue to contemplate, even millennia later, as we seek to avoid the corrupting influence of power in our own lives. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY THIRTY-THREE – GOLD

Good morning to you,

Of all the gifts presented by the Magi to the young Jesus, GOLD is the one with which we are most familiar. Most of us will have some form of gold jewellery in our homes and, whether we know it or not, there are tiny bits of gold in our electronic gadgets. Even so, few of us have lots of gold just lying around! As such, gold is both ubiquitous and rare: we all have or want a little bit of it but affording very much is outwith the means of most. Our desire for gold is not historically unique. Gold has always been considered a precious metal, perhaps due to its rarity but perhaps, even more so, because of its gleam and glow, which lasts for a long time, as gold resists corrosion. For most of history, gold was seen as a luxury symbol of wealth and status, often reserved for members of royalty or the ruling elite. Many theorise that this is why Jesus was presented with gold by the Magi, i.e. as a symbol of his kingship on earth; although, interestingly, we have no idea how much he was actually given...does that matter?!

Today, gold is most commonly used (visibly at least) in wedding and/or engagement rings. There are good practical reasons for doing so: it is a metal that is both easy to manipulate into a circle and long-wearing, so that most rings last the lifetime of the wearer (and longer!). Symbolically, its precious nature conveys the precious covenant of marriage, whilst the giving and receiving indicates the desire to share everything with the spouse-to-be. As a girl, however, my memories of gold wedding bands are linked with sore eyes! Whenever I had the beginnings of a stye coming on an eyelid, my mum would remove her ring and get me to rub it against the eyelid. I have no idea of the scientific efficacy of this technique (it is certainly not mentioned on the NHS website!) but I do not remember having severe or long lasting styes. Again, such perceptions of gold as good for our health are not new: for millennia, gold was thought to have positive health effects because... well... how could something so pure *not* be good for us?! And yet, there might be a kernel of truth there, because gold is, at least, non-toxic. As such, there are many people who can only wear jewellery, particularly earrings, made substantially of gold, unless they want some form of adverse reaction or skin-staining.

I wonder then... What does gold mean to/for you? Does that change how you perceive the gift of gold to Jesus? Might the Magi have been offering something very different from the traditional status symbol of rulers? Does it matter how much was given? Is there a disconnect between the life Jesus was to live and the offering of gold? If so, how? Go on: use your holy imaginations today, and may you be blessed in your wonderings, Fee.



DAY THIRTY-FOUR – FRANKINCENSE

Sunday greetings to you all,

Today we consider the second of the Magi's gifts, FRANKINCENSE. The name of this aromatic tree resin has been a joy for funny Christmas card writers for years, and a tongue-twister for many a young child, but the nature of the gift is hidden from most. What is it about frankincense that makes it a fitting gift for "the child who has been born king of the Jews"?

Frankincense literally means 'high-quality/pure incense' and was used by the Israelites as a holy offering to God. As such, many theorise that this gift demonstrates either the priestly role of Jesus or his divine nature. Even today, many Christian churches use frankincense in their worship services, at least partly symbolising the prayers of the people rising to God. However, frankincense is also a perfume—at the time of Christ's birth often used by royalty—so it might also have signified Jesus's kingly status. And, just like gold, there might also be health benefits to this substance, with many believing it to have anti-bacterial properties. All very good reasons for this fragrant gift to be given to a special child.

Today, frankincense continues to be harvested in vast quantities, for various uses, from certain trees in the Boswellia family. These trees grow in harsh, arid regions of the world, and key production countries include Somaliland, Somalia, Oman, Ethiopia, and the Yemen. Trees start producing resin when they are about 10 years old and are tapped 2 or 3 times a year. However, over-tapping, tree-clearing for different land us, and natural infestations mean that Boswellia trees are dwindling in numbers. There is a delicate balance to be struck in the future production of frankincense because the more a tree is tapped, the less likely its seeds are to germinate. A powerful reminder that our greed can be our downfall.

There are so many reasons why frankincense might have been given to Jesus. Knowing what I know now about this potent resin, I am drawn by the idea of knowing when enough is enough. Jesus did not shy away from occasional luxury or extravagance, but he knew when it was appropriate and when it was not. That might be my reason for the Magi's frankincense from now on.... Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY THIRTY-FIVE – MYRRH

Good morning everyone,

We are onto the third gift offered to Jesus by the Magi: MYRRH. It is, in some ways, similar to frankincense in that it is an aromatic tree resin harvested by tapping trees. The trees in question are part of the Commiphora family and they grow in similar locations to Boswellia trees: Somalia, Oman, the Yemen and Ethiopia, as well as parts of Saudi Arabia. As such, it is beginning to feel like a standard set of Christmas gifts given to someone who is important but not well known: some bling and some smellies! But, like the others, the gift of myrrh has attracted symbolism and meaning throughout the years. The root meaning of myrrh is “bitter” and is commonly used to scent oils, make perfumes, and for medicinal-type purposes. In ancient Egypt, it was used in the embalming of mummies and is mentioned in John’s Gospel as one of the spices used on Jesus’s body after his death, “according to the burial custom of the Jews”. As such, a common theory for the gift of myrrh is that it signalled Jesus’s mortality (alongside his divinity) and pointed towards his death. This is an attractive argument, but I tend to be sceptical of theologies and perspectives that focus on the death of Jesus to the virtual exclusion of his birth and life (and resurrection!). There is nothing more certain than everyone who is born will die...should we all give myrrh to newborns?! Another theory is that, like the gold and frankincense, the myrrh was in honour of Jesus’s kingly status, for myrrh was often used in anointing oils. Given the Magi were searching for a king, this seems a plausible explanation.

The more I learn about the nature and uses of the Magi’s gifts, the more suspicious I become of the symbolism of king/deity/mortal with which I grew up. Such interpretations are too narrow, limiting our imaginations about what was going on during that visit. As of today (and this could most definitely change!), I am torn between thinking the Magi offered gifts ‘fit for a king’, given the surrounding Scripture narrative, and the notion that they were offering practical gifts from their toolkit (noting that myrrh’s health properties seem more promising than frankincense’s). Today, useful gifts for newborns and parents are things like nappies and cotton wool, muslin cloths, barrier cream and vests. Maybe the Magi gave, from their own wisdom, things they may bring.

There is a joke that, after the Wise Men left, Wise Women came with nappies, wine and chocolate! Whilst I wholeheartedly appreciate the sentiment and humour, this Christmastide I have begun to rethink just how ‘wise’ these visitors from the East were. Perhaps their gifts truly were from the heart, offering something of themselves to make the lives of a family they did not know just a little better...? If so, I would like some of their wisdom in the year ahead. God be with you, Fee.



DAY THIRTY-SIX – MAGI

Good morning to you all,

We have now arrived at Twelfth Night, the eve of Epiphany, when we mark the visit of the MAGI to Jesus. Whilst they have been in the background of our most reflections, we turn the spotlight upon them today. In many ways, they are the most mysterious of visitors: we do not know exactly where they come from, other than “the East”; nor do we know how many there were: tradition suggests either 3 or 12, but all we know from Scripture is that there was more than one; nor is it entirely clear how long after Jesus’s birth they appeared, with Herod’s infanticide orders suggesting it could be as long as 3 years. Even just talking about them, we have various options for their collective name—kings, wise men, philosophers, astrologers—which I why I prefer to at least try to stick close to the original word in Matthew’s Gospel: magi.

Another area for wondering and discussion is why the magi came in the first place. Yes, the scripture tells us that they came to pay homage to “the child who has been born king of the Jews” having “observed his star at its rising”. But why would priests of the Zoroastrian religion—the role most often given to these eastern visitors—come to pay the new Jewish king homage? Commentators on Matthew’s Gospel suggest that they represent the Gentile world, for whom Jesus was born just as much as for the Jewish world. There is theological and literary weight behind that position. However, I wonder if something more subtle is going on, here.... It had become increasingly accepted in recent decades that, for a few of centuries before Jesus was born, there was cultural, philosophical and religious dialogue going on between the Israelite people and those practising Zoroastrianism. There appears quite clear evidence of the impact of Zoroastrian beliefs on Jewish theologies and, perhaps even more so, on early Christian understandings of good-and-evil, salvation and bodily resurrection. How does it feel to us, then, if we hear the magi’s story as one of interfaith dialogue...and open-hearted search for truth, wisdom and the divine...rather than the subsuming of all religions into one?

Jesus is an important figure to many non-Christians in the world. What might we learn about his life, influence and message from God if we were to welcome other voices in our conversations about Jesus, just as Mary welcomed the magi into her home? Could we receive as much as we give? May your hearts find peace in God, the source of all truth, wisdom, faith, hope and love, Fee.



DAY THIRTY-SEVEN – EGYPT

Good morning and welcome to the final reflection of our Follow The Star Journey!

Of all the people and places mentioned in the nativity narratives, EGYPT is probably the one least associated with the story...we are more likely to think of pyramids and mummies than a place of sanctuary for Jesus and his family. Yet, it is the place to where, according to Matthew, Joseph took Mary and Jesus in a bid to keep them safe from the wrath of Herod. We do not know if Mary and Joseph had been to Egypt before but, even if they had, it would not have been as refugees fleeing violence. Neither did they return to Bethlehem when the crisis passed; instead they returned to, and built a new home in, a different place: Nazareth, in the mountainous region of Galilee.

Egypt was a place of significance for the Israelite people. It had been a place of sanctuary for Jacob's son Joseph after his brothers had sold him to travelling merchants. It is also where the wider family of Jacob found food during years of famine in their own land. But it was also the place where the Israelites faced slavery, racial-injustice and infanticide.

Egypt is a sign of both blessing and curse...a place of sanctuary and oppression. For theological reasons, Matthew draws strong parallels between Jesus and Moses, but I would like to use Egypt (and Nazareth) as a metaphor for what comes next. What do we do after the Christmas season has finished? Where do we go after Epiphany? Do we return to the "same-old" or do we travel a different path, make new homes, seek God in other places?

In recent years there has been a cry from some Christian quarters to "keep Christ in Christmas". This year, I have been delighted to see some push-back to this. Those whose ministries I most respect are saying, instead, "let Christ out of Christmas". In other words, let us not keep Jesus as a tiny, quiet baby, all wrapped up and well-behaved in a manger. That is not who Jesus was born to be. Instead, Jesus came to change our lives, world and communities for the better. Jesus brought down the mighty and lifted the humble; Jesus demanded justice and sacrifice; Jesus listened to women and touched the 'unclean'. For Christmas to mean anything, we must not keep Christ in Christmas: we must let him into every area of our lives.

As you pack away decorations and cards this year, perhaps you could keep something from this season out on display. It could be anything, and just one thing, but something to remind you every day of the importance, power and grace of the incarnation. Whatever it is, I pray it will bless you each day this year. May you know the warmth and welcome of the Epiphany light, this day and always, Fee.

