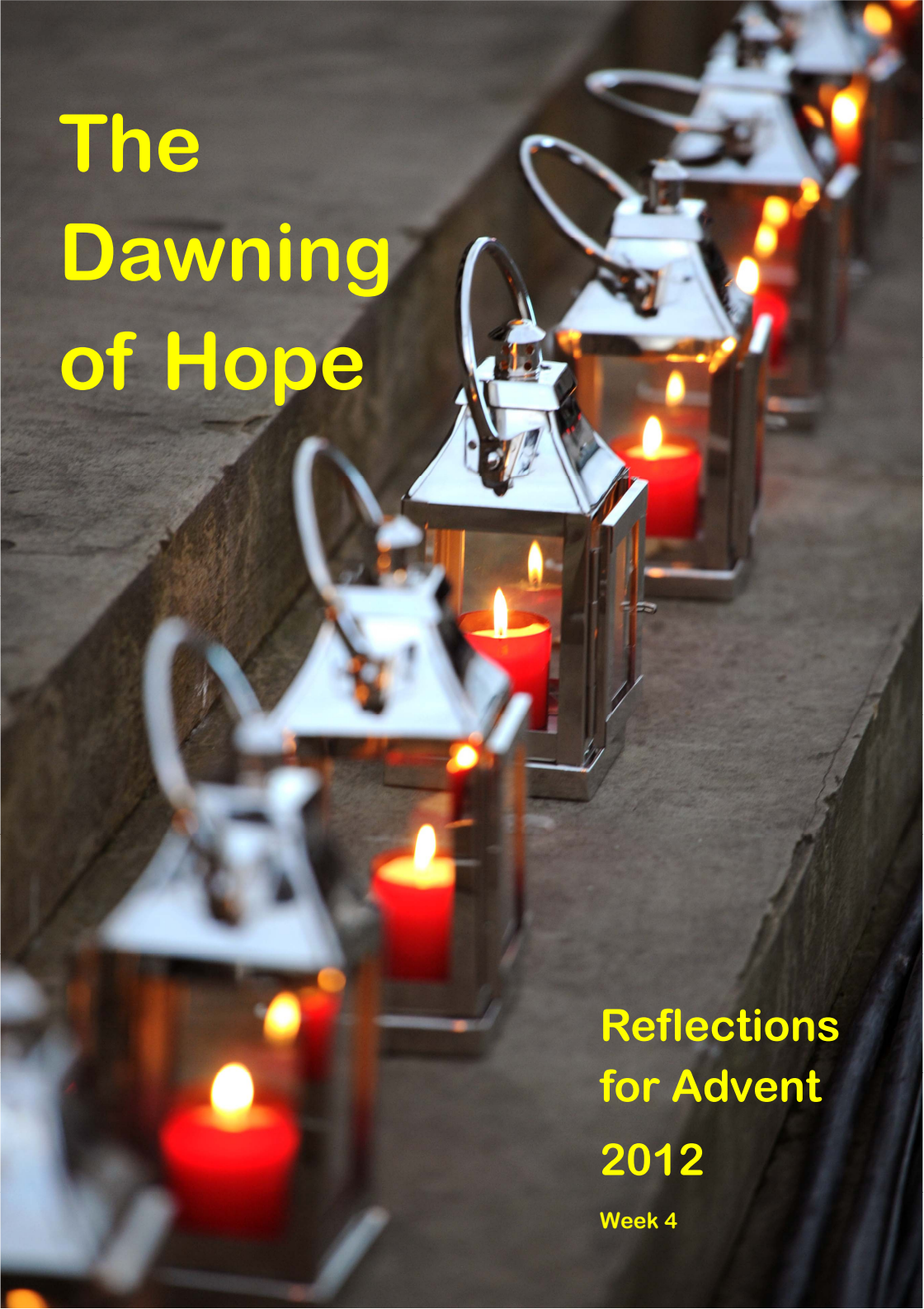


A row of lit lanterns with red candles inside, set against a dark, textured background. The lanterns are arranged in a line, receding into the distance. The light from the candles is warm and glowing, creating a sense of hope and reflection.

The Dawning of Hope

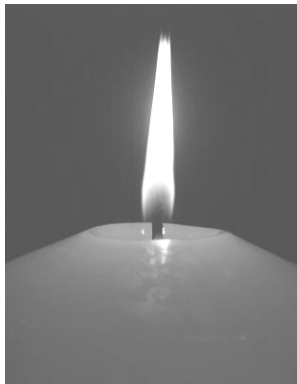
Reflections
for Advent
2012

Week 4

Week 4 - Mary, the mother of Jesus

The fourth week of Advent moves events further forward. Our focus turns to a young woman, suddenly thrown into the midst of the narrative as it is announced to her that she is to give birth to a child who will become the Messiah. The child inside her is the first expression of God's physical presence within the world.

So often it is mothers who are at the forefront of movements for justice and change. There is something about motherhood that somehow manages to transcend many of the traditional barriers and fears that prevent people from taking action. While they were by no means alone, so much of the energy and tenacity that fuelled the Hillsborough campaign came from mothers. Mary's response is typical of so many, willing to sacrifice her own comfort and wellbeing for the sake of her child.



19. The Messiah is coming - Luke 1:26-33

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Everybody longed for a Messiah; they were weary of living with things as they should not be, and yearned for someone who could bring about deliverance. Their prophets had spoken again and again of one who would come to liberate God's people; their message had been passed from generation to generation, and the injustice served on those who longed to be free, was obvious.

There will always be those whose words can inspire us to believe in better, but we also need to know that their hopes and dreams are more than mere aspiration, we need to see signs that a new dawn is coming.

Few would have seen this as a turning point in history, but when the Angel of God announced to a young woman that she would become pregnant and bear the child who would become that Messiah, hopes and dreams began to become reality. It would be many years before a young Galilean preacher emerged, proclaiming a compelling message of hope, healing the sick with the touch of his hand, and commanding the very elements of nature to submit to his control.

From the moment that 96 Liverpool fans died, and hundreds of others were injured, traumatised and falsely accused, their right to justice was obvious. But it was many years before truth was finally acknowledged, and even this was only the first-fruit of a further journey to its end. But the reality of the present gives cause for hope in the future. In a similar way, the birth of a child who would become Messiah, gives us cause to believe in God's eternity.

**God of all humanity, open my eyes to your work in the present,
that I might believe more fully in your future.**

20. The path of the righteous is level - Isaiah 26:7-11

The path of the righteous is level; you, the Upright One, make the way of the righteous smooth. Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts. My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you. When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness. But when grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil, and do not regard the majesty of the Lord. Lord, your hand is lifted high, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame.

Living with that which we know to be wrong can be a draining and difficult experience. Our desire and longing for things to be put right can become all consuming, dominating our consciousness 24 hours a day. The prophet Isaiah recounts a similar experience, describing himself as one whose soul yearns and spirit longs for God's righteousness day and night.

But for all the pain of the experience, our capacity to recognise that things should be different, is itself a cause for hope. Isaiah confronts us with a world of contrast – those who long for justice and those who have lost sight of its need. Those who continue to do that which is clearly evil, have lost sight of the majesty of God. We might at times believe that our deeds are beyond human scrutiny, and when we do, constraint and accountability become lost. But no-one can escape God's judgement, none can ignore his call for righteousness. Those who have lost a sense of their accountability, are letting go of their capacity to seek out the One who is our source of hope and security.

When we yearn for justice, we can draw strength from knowing that our lives are in tune with the heartbeat of God. This world might be easier to bear if we could somehow become blind to all that is wrong within it. But our inner longings for things to be put right, bear testimony to us of the reality of God, who promises a place in eternity to those who follow him.

God offers us peace in the here and now, by inviting us to leave in his hands our yearnings for justice and truth; he offers us hope for the future by placing within us that desire for a world where his purpose prevails.

All seeing God, may my yearning for justice be unending but never overwhelming.

21. Before you sing your hymns of praise . . .

Isaiah 58:6-9

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

People have drawn many parallels between religion and football. Jubilant crowds, chanting and singing words of hope and adoration can be found in temple and stadium alike. But the passion that we invest in such things, rightly comes second to the cause of justice around which so many have united. Celebrity players and the most ordinary of supporters have found common identity in their pursuit of this end.

And at every turn, there has been a natural resonance between this vital cause and the community of faith. It was in a lofty cathedral that truth was finally unwrapped from deception; with lighted candles and simple prayers that people, in quiet dignity, sought consolation for their loss. And through the words of Isaiah, this natural connection between life and faith is recognised and forged.

As the prophet led and participated in the religious life of his people, God placed within his heart a striking realisation. More important than the rituals of worship or the disciplines of prayer and fasting, were to seek the wellbeing of those who suffered; to seek liberation for those who were oppressed. It was in the midst of these pursuits, that God promised his people would find light and healing, and discover themselves to be surrounded by his glory and presence.

God is as interested in the endeavours of those who fight for justice as he is in the activities of the religious; he is more attentive to those who simply cry to him for help, than those who might offer polished liturgies and rituals. We live in a world that might often leave us crying for help, but this is a place in which we can also find ourselves surrounded by God’s presence.

Holy God, may I never offer you words alone, but actions that reflect the values and concerns of your Kingdom.

22. Rachel Weeping for her children - Matthew 2:16-18

When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Wise Men, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from them. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

These words record a harrowing episode that occurred shortly after Jesus was born. The Wise Men, as part of their celebrated journey to find the Christ Child, announced their intent to King Herod. Herod saw Jesus as a threat, and in his determination to destroy him, killed every male child in the city. The image of mothers weeping inconsolably for their children, is sadly one with which almost every generation and culture is familiar.

The birth of Christ was the dawning of hope; the coming of salvation. Yet at its very heart we find tragedy on a scale that we struggle to take in. In the moment that the King of Kings steps onto the scene of human history, we witness an abuse of earthly power and a cruel and destructive pursuit of self-interest that even surpasses the shameful revelations of Hillsborough.

How, we might ask, can we speak the language of hope and salvation, when we live in a world that is capable of administering such atrocity on its inhabitants? But the Nativity story is not one of mere escapism or sentimentality; it is rooted in the harsh realities of this world. Those who declare in faith that their hope is in Christ, might also be those who are found weeping in the streets. These two are not in opposition to one another, and Advent reminds us that even at salvation's dawn, tragedy and anguish were not far away. Yet it also declares that hope can never be fully extinguished even by the most evil of intentions.

God is no stranger to the tears of a city in mourning, and his promise to every community that has been torn apart by tragedy, is that though evil might not always be escaped in the here and now, there is consolation in the *'yet to come.'*

God of hope and salvation, even when evil abounds, may faith and goodness be never extinguished.

23. I will not forget you - Isaiah 49:14-16

Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones. But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.” Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

The cry of the city is that God has forsaken her. The people of Zion had good reason to wonder whether their God has turned his back on them, their streets were desolate, their people defeated, their life seemed in ruins. But God’s message to the city in mourning is “you are not forgotten.”

There is something that is tenacious and unrelenting about a mother’s love; she will never give up on her child, even when everyone else might. Yet, says God, even a mother’s love has its limit, and it is at this point that you will discover that mine is of even greater measure.

We are confronted again by a resounding message of hope; no matter what our earthly circumstances, God’s love for us is beyond measure; he will never forsake or forget us. We regularly recite the names of those who were lost; they are written into memorials so that they will not be forgotten. This matters; and in reflection of this, God declares that the names of those who have called upon him, are etched into the very palms of his hands – they belong to an everlasting Kingdom of hope and promise.

Even in the midst of trouble, we have cause to rejoice and burst into song, for our chorus is not rooted in the experiences of the present, but in the nature of the God who gives us hope within it. Advent invites us to centre ourselves afresh on the God of promise; the God who in Christ has placed within history the signs of hope’s fulfilment; the God who promises that his love will never fail, and we will never be forgotten. A God whose commitment to us, is greater than our commitment to any earthly cause, no matter how noble.

Everlasting God; whatever is around me, may the songs of my heart be always rooted in your love and goodness.

24. A Saviour is born - Luke 2:8-15

There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”

Shepherds had a reputation! If you had a message to share, the task would not be given to a shepherd; in that particular society, their stories would simply not be believed. Yet it was to a group of shepherds that God entrusted one of the most important announcements in history – Christ has come, salvation has dawned.

Like the Old Testament prophets before them, the power of the shepherds’ message lay not in their own qualifications or standing, but the source from which it came. And so it is that as believers across the world celebrate again the birth of Christ, it is a group of ordinary shepherds, rushing from the fields to find the stable, who will summon them to gather in worship of the new born King.

It was a group of ordinary parents, brothers, sisters, wives and husbands who led a fight for justice that has captured the attention of the world. What they lacked in qualifications and credibility in the eyes of many, was eclipsed by their conviction of the validity of their cause. They stood in the vanguard of a campaign that touches every victim of oppression for, in the words of a famous Baptist preacher, unfurled in the Anfield Kop just a few days after the report was published, *“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”*.

Their fight pointed the attention of the world to principles and values that transcend the schemes and motives of human authorities. Their journey was far from easy, but their cause was utterly worthwhile. In a similar way, as we follow in the footsteps of a group of startled shepherds, we encounter an event that points us to a greater reality; a future and a hope that transcends every earthly struggle. Our vision and experience of Christ inspires us to continue our journey, until that day when his Kingdom is fully come.

Living Christ, lead me in your footsteps, that I might walk through every struggle until the day I stand in your eternal presence

