**Home Service Sheet Sunday 24th December 2023**

**Call to Worship:**                  **Psalm 89:1-4**

I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord, forever;
    with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.
For I said, “Steadfast love will be built up forever;
    in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness.”
You have said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
    I have sworn to David my servant:
‘I will establish your offspring forever,
    and build your throne for all generations.’”

**Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank You and praise You for Your steadfast love and faithfulness that You have shown us in and through Your Son, Jesus. We praise You for the way in which You have stepped into our world and opened up the way to everlasting life. Loving Father, thank You for Your Word and the many promises that fill its pages. Thank You that nothing is impossible with respect to any of Your precious promises. Forgive us for the times we have doubted Your Word and help us to stand firm in all that You have promised. As we take this time to read and reflect upon Your Word help us to listen closely, understand and apply that Word in our lives. In Jesus’ Name we pray, amen.

**Hymn                                     The Angel Gabriel Came**translated by ***S Baring-Gould***

<https://youtu.be/fzC9dxwRddc?si=WuxElXV-3qWrAw3T>

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
His wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;
"All hail," said he, “Thou lowly maiden, Mary,
"Most highly favoured lady." Gloria!

“For known a blessed mother thou shalt be,

All generations laud and honour thee,
Thy Son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold;
Most highly favoured lady." Gloria!

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head;
"To me be as it pleases God," she said.
"My soul shall laud and magnify His holy name."
Most highly favoured lady. Gloria!

Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ, was born
In Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
And Christian folk throughout the world will ever say,
"Most highly favoured lady." Gloria!

**The Lord’s Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Bible Reading                     Luke 1:26-38**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothedto a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be bornwill be called holy - the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servantof the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

**Reflection**

Today we come to that part of the Christmas story where the angel appears to Mary and tells her what is about to happen. From this point on, Mary’s life would be changed forever. She must have been brought up as a faithful Jewish girl, hearing the Scriptures and worshiping God. Yet, nothing could have fully prepared her for the unique plan that God had purposed her for – to miraculously conceive and naturally give birth to His Son. Mary was likely a young teenager at this point and was already engaged. This wonderful news was also scary and earth shattering for her.

In our time there are many people who struggle with the idea that God placed His Son inside Mary without any human intervention, and certainly we see a similar internal struggle inside her fiancée, Joseph (see Matthew 1:18-25). How could this be, as Mary was a virgin, as she says to the angel. In our Bible reading the angel does give a partial explanation, but probably the most helpful part for us is when he says “nothing will be impossible with God”. In other words, remember that this is God’s doing and He can do whatever He likes. It would undoubtedly be interesting to try to understand how God placed His Son inside Mary, but I suspect it would be beyond our limited human understanding.

As we look at this very familiar passage of Scripture there a few important points to note. Firstly Mary is addressed by the angel as ‘favoured one’ and told that God is with her. Mary was not special in herself, but was rather treated favourably by God out of His grace and mercy. She was a human being, and as such was a sinner (despite what the Catholic Church teaches). She was singled out not because of her behaviour, but rather because of God’s grace and undeserved favour. In the same way, none of us is deserving of God’s grace and favour and yet He has given us the gift of faith in His Son, and through that the gift of eternal life. It is not about what we do as human beings, but rather entirely about what God has done for us.

Secondly we should also notice how Mary responds to the angel. She is described as being ‘greatly troubled’ and needed the reassurance of the angel to not be afraid. As an aside it should tell us that angels are truly fearsome creatures and not some kind of chubby child with wings! Angels are God’s messengers and army (that’s what the term ‘heavenly host’ is really referring to). If the angels are fearsome, how much more so is God to be feared and reverenced? That’s something that I believe the Church has lost sight of in our time. We tend to see God as our friend or loving Father, rather than the Almighty Creator who will judge all people. All these images are true, but we must try and balance them and treat God with the respect and awe that He deserves.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we should notice Mary’s final response and attitude towards God and His will for her. She says, “Behold, I am the servantof the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” She deliberately submits herself to God, choosing to do so, even though God can do whatever He wants to do. Mary is a great example for us to follow in this respect. We should also submit to God, choosing to be His servant or bond-slave (one who has been freed but chooses to be a slave to their former master). In practice this means that God’s will must be our priority and aim in all that we do. Our own desires, ambitions and interests must always be second to God’s ways.

We also need to note the second half of what Mary says. “Let it be to me according to your word.” Did Mary recognise the power of God’s Word? We don’t really know from what she says here, but she certainly believed the message of the angel and the fact that it was from God. There was no doubt in her mind of its truthfulness and trustworthiness. This is in stark contrast to the words of the serpent in the garden who questioned Eve by saying, “Did God really say?” Doubting God’s Word, whether the written Word or the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, is not a good way to respond to God. Rather we should follow Mary’s example again and prayerfully ask God to do what He has promised in His Word, and ask for His help to do what He had instructed in His Word. To God be the glory alone – amen!

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your goodness and grace towards us in Jesus, Your Son. You looked down on us and, despite our sinful rebellion, it was Your purpose to save us from the terrible consequences of our sin. You sent Your only Son to become the all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. We thank You that through faith in Him we will not perish but have everlasting life. Gracious God, we thank You for the example of Mary, who humbly surrendered to Your will. May we also walk humbly before You all the days of our lives so that You would use us in whatever way You choose, to Your praise and glory. This we ask in Jesus’ Name, amen.

**Benediction**

Today, as we celebrate that You are with us in the birth of Jesus, help us to continue to live in hope, peace, joy, and love. May we share Your love with those we meet on life’s journeys. May Your Holy Spirit fill our hearts with glad tidings like the angels brought to the shepherds that first Christmas. May Jesus, the Prince of Peace be found in us, comforting and challenging us to live out our lives in accordance with Your ways and to Your glory. In His Name we pray, amen.

Attachments area

[Preview YouTube video The Angel Gabriel From Heaven Came (Tune: Gabriel's Message - 4vv) [with lyrics for congregations]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzC9dxwRddc&authuser=0" \t "_blank)

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