A 4-part journey through Advent designed to be used in small groups or individually – helping us to shine as Lights for Christ

Travelling Light

Part 1

HEADING FOR THE HILL COUNTRY

(includes Course Introduction)

THE DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD
Renewed | Released | Rejuvenated

Lights for Christ

Course Introduction

Welcome to Travelling Light

The Bible is full of comings and goings. People travel, sometimes long distances, sometimes just locally. Some travel willingly, others reluctantly; some carry a lot of stuff with them, others take little or nothing. All these movements become times of learning for those involved, part of how they grow in relationships with each other and with God.

In this Advent course, we come alongside a few of those travellers. We journey with them, reflecting with them, almost getting into conversation with them about their experiences. As we walk together with them, we notice things about where we ourselves have come from and where we are heading. We hope to find inspiration, to put a spring in our step; also guidance about the route ahead; and perhaps some warnings which may prompt us to change our own direction of travel.

In all this, we move on – towards the celebration of Christmas and towards the new year that lies beyond it. As followers of Jesus Christ, we walk with him, discovering more of the light which Christ brings and finding ways to share that light with others.

How to Make the Most of this Course - on-site or online

'Travelling Light' is designed to be used in small groups, although it can also be effective if you use it on your own.

Groups might use it when meeting online, or when gathered physically 'on-site', or as a blend of the two. Please use it flexibly, in whatever way works best for you. We suggest that the one group member might read aloud the bible passage, while another reads the comment on it and discussion questions. You'll find various questions, designed to provoke thought and discussion; if you don't have time for all of them, choose the ones you judge likely to be most fruitful.

Accessing the course online will enable you to use some of the extra resources which enrich it, such as pictures and videos. Printable documents (pdf format) can also be downloaded, which provide simply the text of the course material.

The course has 4 parts which all follow a similar structure plus a brief closing reflection and prayer.

HEADING FOR THE HILL COUNTRY	**THE ROADS TO BETHLEHEM**	**MOVING ON – JOYFUL AND FEARFUL**	**GOD COMES TO US**

PART 1 – HEADING FOR THE HILL COUNTRY

"The Lord watches over the path of the righteous" — PSALM 1:6

Starting Out

Q. Can you remember a particular journey from your childhood? What do you remember? Was there a special reason for making this trip? What were your feelings?

If you are using this course in a group, you might talk about this experience with someone else.

Receiving the Light

What can we learn from the Bible's travellers?

Picture a girl, perhaps just beginning her teenage years (the usual age for betrothal and marriage in her culture). She sets out from her northern village, to visit a relative who lives way down south. She would not be travelling alone, but our 'camera' ignores any companions, focusing our attention simply on her.

Read Luke 1:39-56

Why does she make this very unusual trip? All we know is what the previous verses tell us: that God has spoken to Mary, totally unexpectedly, through a messenger. This angel told her that she will miraculously become the mother of God's Son, who will be the new king of God's people – and that her older relative Elizabeth, without children for so many years, is now also expecting a baby. So Mary hastily heads off, perhaps to confirm that this is all true, perhaps to seen an ally who might understand and help her.

How do you picture Mary as she heads south into the hill country? What does she carry with her? Is she burdened in any way? What might she be thinking and feeling?

As Mary arrives and the two women meet, we may sense relief and delight. Joyful sparks immediately begin to fly! Presumably Mary can now see for herself that Elizabeth really is pregnant, just as the angel told her. But somehow, through the movement of her baby and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth also knows that Mary is expecting. Despite being the senior figure, with many priestly connections, Elizabeth declares God's blessing on her young visitor, treating her as an honoured guest: 'the mother of my Lord'!

For Elizabeth, the pregnancy is much delayed and longed for and will be seen as a sign of God's blessing; for Mary, pregnancy has arrived impossibly soon and will become a cause of gossip and disgrace. Both these women find their world turned upside down, through

God's strange and unexpected grace. Mary bursts into song (verses 46-55), proclaiming and celebrating how God turns the world upside down. She begins with a focus on what God has done in her own life, then increasingly looks outward at God's work in the wider world and down the generations.

- Look at the verbs in Mary's song. What does God do? Do any of God's actions surprise you?
- Mary's song celebrates both God's might and God's mercy. God uses power to bring mercy to the lowly, at the expense of the high and mighty. How might that turn the world upside down?
- Three times we are told that Mary receives God's blessing (Luke 1:42, Luke 1:45-46). What does 'blessing' mean? Might that blessing ever feel like a burden?
- When Mary eventually returns home (verse 56), do you think she may have been feeling lighter in spirit? Or anxious about the future? Or…?

Walking in the Light

How might we travel more wisely today?

- Setting out on a journey makes us think about how much stuff we really need. Is this Advent a good time for you to de-clutter: perhaps take some bags of surplus stuff to a local charity shop or recycling centre?
- Do you have a trusted friend, who lightens your spirit when you turn to them? If so, why not let God – and that person – know how grateful you are; and ask God to help you be that kind of friend to others.
- Mary's song is full of phrases from her scriptures, our Old Testament (e.g. Genesis 30:13; Psalms 98:3 Psalms 111:9; 1 Samuel 2:1-10). Which parts of the Bible do you treasure – and sing? How does that help nourish your spiritual life?
- Mary's song begins with a personal focus of delight and gratitude, then progresses to an outward focus of awareness and concern about what is going on in the wider world. Can you build in that double focus in a balanced way in your own prayers?

Reflecting the Light

Where does more light need to shine?

- A welcoming hospitality can bring great blessing and joy, particularly to those who are vulnerable and need some support. How might you develop your own ministry and mission in this area, either at home or in the life of your church?
- Reflect on God's might and mercy. Think about situations where you have some degree of power – perhaps at home, or at work, or in church and the wider world. How can you use that power to show mercy to those who have less power? Can you do that even when hard decisions need to be made? Pray together that you can reflect God's nature in any situations which come to mind.
- Think about upcoming Christmas events which your church may be organising. Who could you invite along to share the good news? Can you offer to travel with them and be alongside them on the day? If church gatherings are unfamiliar to them, an encouraging companion can make all the difference.

Enrichment

There are some other online resources which you might find helpful if you are able. Visit https://www.lightsforchrist.uk/trlight-part-1

- Video – Lumo - Gospel of Luke 1:26-56
- Song - Pentatonix - Mary, Did You Know?
- Song -Wexford Carol/Magnificat - Keith & Kristyn Getty
- Song - Magnificat Gregoriano - Harpa Dei

Prayer

A pilgrimage prayer

Dear Lord, you called your disciples to follow in your way:
You are the Way, the Truth and Life.
So we come, seeking to follow in your footsteps.

Creator of the earth, as we journey
Help us to walk lightly, treasuring the world you have given us,
And cherishing each other.

And grant, we pray, that our walk
May be part of your plan to care for creation.
Seeking climate justice and the coming of your Kingdom
On earth as it is in heaven.

Christian Concern for One World

Winter Wander

Between this session of the course and the next one, you might like to travel a little yourself. If your situation allows it, try a short walk along your street or around your neighbourhood. You could pray for whoever is behind the doors and shop windows you pass. You might admire some local Christmas lights and pray for Christ's light to shine in that house. You might reflect on one thing that has stuck with you from the course so far and pray about how best to make it a part of your daily life.

Next Session

PART 2: THE ROADS TO BETHLEHEM

A 4-part journey through Advent designed to be used in small groups or individually – helping us to shine as Lights for Christ

Travelling Light

Part 2

THE ROADS TO BETHELHEM

THE DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD
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Lights for Christ

PART 2 – THE ROADS TO BETHLEHEM

"Blessed the one whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways." PSALM 84:5

Starting Out

Q. What do you generally enjoy about travelling? Does anything make travelling a particular challenge for you?

If you are using this course in a group, you might talk about this experience with someone else.

Receiving the Light

What can we learn from the Bible's travellers?

Mary & Joseph…an army of angels…a group of shepherds…wise men from the east…even a strange light in the sky: in the gospel accounts, they all converge - on Bethlehem. Why on this small, nondescript town, rather than the great capital city of Jerusalem? The God who surprises and subverts our expectations is at work.

Read Luke 2:1-19 & Matthew 2:1-11

Joseph's journey is ordered by the Roman emperor, who wants to count his subjects in order to tax and control them. Joseph and Mary travel on roads which have helpfully been upgraded and made safer by the Romans, to support their occupying army. Why does Mary accompany Joseph on such a journey at this stage of her pregnancy? Perhaps there is some fear of what might happen if she was left without him in Nazareth, due to the scandal of her being pregnant. Arriving at the birthplace of his ancestor, David, they probably stay with Joseph's relatives, where Mary gives birth in the main living space of the house, as the guest room (a better translation than 'inn') is already occupied (Luke 2:7).

Shepherds also travel after prompting from on high: but the angelic messenger sent to them proclaims a Lord who is above even the emperor. Their journey is not commanded, but invited. Their walk is short and familiar: it's their regular commute, from the fields where King David was once a shepherd back to town. Yet the amazing news they have heard transforms the journey, putting a spring in their step. It is these ordinary people (rather than the high and mighty) who glimpse God's glory – not in the Jerusalem Temple, but in the fields – and are the first to hear and to see God's good news.

Some while later come the group of foreigners on a much longer and unfamiliar journey. In contrast to the Jewish shepherds - poor people, often disrespected, lacking formal education - these Magi (wise men) are foreigners, Gentiles with status, who have probably studied to a high level and may be wealthy. God invites them too: this 'good news of great joy' is for all kinds of people, for the whole world: for any who are hungry enough to search and humble enough to kneel before this new-born king.

In all this, we hear echoes of Mary's prophetic song, which we read in session 1: in God's mysterious, upside-down world, the powerful and proud are humbled while the lowly and hungry are lifted up (Luke 1:51-53).

- Put yourself in the shoes of Mary & Joseph, or the shepherds, or the Magi, as they travel. What do you notice? What do you hear or smell? What feelings arise? Does any of this help you relate to their experience and enlarge your understanding of God?
- The emperor Caesar Augustus ('majestic') was often acclaimed as divine, using titles such as 'Lord', 'Son of a god', 'saviour', 'bringer of peace', 'good news for all the world'. Can you see how the angel's words subvert this kind of propaganda? Should Caesar see Jesus as a threat?
- The birth of Jesus - 'Immanuel', God with us (Matt. 1:23) takes place neither in pampered luxury, nor in total destitution, but in what was a fairly 'ordinary' setting for its day. How do you respond to that?
- One group who don't travel to Bethlehem are Jerusalem's religious leaders – even though they know their scriptures well enough to advise King Herod about where the new king should be born. What might be the reasons for them failing to go and see for themselves?

Walking in the Light

How might we travel more wisely today?

- For many of us, travelling is a part of daily life. Yet travel is having destructive side-effects on the air people breathe and on the wider creation. Are you finding ways to reduce pollution when you travel? If you are in a group, share ideas, particularly about short, local journeys.
- The shepherds encounter God unexpectedly, while at work. Has that ever happened to you - either in something dramatic, or in a smaller but significant way? Does God sometimes surprise us today in the routine stuff of life?
- The Magi come a long way. Initially they find themselves in the wrong place. What do you learn from their perseverance? See if there are ways it speaks into your current situation.

- The shepherds respond to God's good news by giving praise to God; the Magi respond by offering valuable treasures to Jesus. Do you recognise in yourself that impulse to give - in response to what God has given you? What could be your next step as a giver?

Reflecting the Light

Where does more light need to shine?

- Everyone who comes to Jesus does so by a different route; each of us has a unique story. What has your route been like? If you are in a small group, share it with someone else in the group. Pray for natural opportunities to share bits of your story with others who are not part of the church - authentic stories are powerful.
- One of the ways we lighten loads, for ourselves and others, is through forgiveness. Do you sense any need to give or receive forgiveness at the moment?
- If scruffy shepherds or unknown foreigners suddenly arrived in your church for Christmas services, how would you try to show them God's welcome?
- The impact of the Covid pandemic has been particularly severe on poor and vulnerable people, in our own country and further afield. What do you think are the most effective ways to respond to that disturbing fact?

Enrichment

Meditation, Paula Gooder

The birth of a baby is
wonderful and terrifying; terrible and beautiful
A baby is born
through pain and with joy; with love and through fear
The birth of a baby is
precarious and marvellous; mysterious and gritty
A baby is born
with screams of agony; and shouts of delight
At the moment of birth
death and life greet each other
The birth of that baby was no different;
poised between death and life, God came to us
a tiny human form, with immense stature

Journey to the Manger (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2015,p.115.)

There are some other online resources which you might find helpful if you are able. Visit https://www.lightsforchrist.uk/trlight-part-2

- Video – Lumo Project- Gospel of Matthew 2: 1-12
- Song - Handel: Messiah, HWV 56 / Pt. 1 - "There were shepherds abiding in the field… Glory to God" Dame Kiri Te Kanawa
- Song -Leonard Cohen's song 'Travelling Light'.
- Song - U2's tribute to the imprisoned Burmese leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, a song called 'Walk On'

Prayer

A pilgrimage prayer

Dear Lord, you called your disciples to follow in your way:
You are the Way, the Truth and Life.
So we come, seeking to follow in your footsteps.

Creator of the earth, as we journey
Help us to walk lightly, treasuring the world you have given us,
And cherishing each other.

And grant, we pray, that our walk
May be part of your plan to care for creation.
Seeking climate justice and the coming of your Kingdom
On earth as it is in heaven.

Christian Concern for One World

Winter Wander

As last week, if your situation allows it, try a walk around your neighbourhood. If it's day time, look out for people who are at work, perhaps in local shops; can you offer a prayer, a hello, a listening ear to one of them? If it's a clear evening, you might enjoy the stars and think of people in this week's bible passages looking up at those same stars in their day. If you pass a local church building, pray that new people will be drawn to encounter Jesus there in the coming weeks.

Next Session

PART 3: MOVING ON – JOYFUL AND FEARFUL

A 4-part journey through Advent designed to be used in small groups or individually – helping us to shine as Lights for Christ

Travelling Light

Part 3

MOVING ON – Joyful and Fearful

THE DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD
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Lights for Christ

PART 3 – MOVING ON – Joyful and Fearful

"And I say, 'O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; truly, I would flee far away" — PSALM 55:6-7

Starting Out

Q. In the Bible's original languages (Hebrew and Greek), 'walk' can also mean 'live' ('I walk in the midst of trouble', Psalm 138:7; 'we walk in the light', 1 John 1:7). To be truly alive, we need to be on the move in some way. **How do you respond to this idea? Does it mean we become relentless activists who can never sit still?**

If you are using this course in a group, you might talk about this experience with someone else.

Receiving the Light

What can we learn from the Bible's travellers?

We finished session 2 with some stillness, as a curious mixture of visitors gathered around the infant Jesus and his parents, marvelling at God's mysterious and wonderful work.

Now the story moves on - and so do these people. What are their next moves? Where do these encounters at Bethlehem lead them next?

Read Luke 2:20

The shepherds return, presumably to work on their regular night-shift in the fields. What they have just experienced prompts a response: they give praise to God, which perhaps prompts in them a new lightness of spirit and a spring in their step as they walk. What might they say to a young colleague left guarding the sheep, or when they arrive back home at sunrise?

Read Matthew 2:12

Those later visitors, the Magi, set out for home, but with mixed feelings. Their recent experience of overwhelming joy (Matt. 2:10) is probably still welling up inside them. But alongside it now is awareness that they are deliberately avoiding and disobeying King Herod, which must make them feel vulnerable as they travel hurriedly by a different route, still far from home in a foreign country. (At least their luggage is slightly lighter, having given away their gifts!)

Read Matthew 2:13-23

Down the road from Jerusalem come King Herod's troops, on a murderous mission. Herod is not a descendant of King David, nor even of Jewish blood; he rules only by permission of the Roman emperor. Notorious for his brutality and paranoia about potential rivals, Herod sees Jesus as a threat to be eliminated. He expresses his power and fear in a sickening massacre of infant children.

But the intended victim has escaped! Responding to God's warning, grabbing what little they can carry, Mary and Joseph have hurried out into the night. The border lies seventy-five miles away. If they get there, what kind of welcome will they face as refugees? Will they find support and be given asylum? We sense the fragility and vulnerability – of the dependant infant Jesus, of his parents, of God's plan. It seems such a strange, risky way for God to do things! Mary's song about the lowly being lifted up and the powerful brought down (session 1) now seems strangely distant and hollow in all this crisis and horror.

How long do Jesus and his parents live as refugees in Egypt? Possibly several years. But Herod's brutal reign does not last for ever ('Where there's death, there's hope!', as one wag put it). Eventually, like their ancestors whom God saved through Moses, they are able to return and settle in their homeland.

- As in the previous session, try putting yourself in the shoes of the shepherds, the Magi and Jesus' family. What might they be feeling, thinking and praying as they move on? How do these experiences change them? Do you relate more strongly to any of them in particular? If so, why might that be?
- The words Matthew quotes about Rachel weeping for her children (Matt 2:18) come from an Old Testament passage which is strangely full of hope for the future (Jeremiah 31). Would knowing this be any help to those who experienced the horrors of the massacre? Or to those reading about it later?
- How do you think the travels and traumas experienced by Jesus' family shaped their own attitudes to other people? Can you see those attitudes emerging later in Jesus' own life and teaching? (For example, Matthew 5:3-10; Matthew 15:21-28; Matthew 25:35.)
- 'Unspeakable brutality characterizes the beginning and the end of Jesus' life. His ministry was within and to a violent world.' (Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*.) Jesus comes to a world of refugees, grieving parents, vicious rulers. How does that affect our understanding of him as 'Immanuel' - 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23; also Matthew 28:20)?

Walking in the Light

How might we travel more wisely today?

- In our Bible passages, we saw some people departing joyful, others probably fearful. What kind of 'season' are you in currently in your spiritual life? Joyful? Or fearful? Or…? Bring those feelings to God honestly, whatever they may be, as you pray. And look for ways to bless someone else who may be in a different 'season' just now.
- What was the very first journey you yourself, or a child you know, made in infancy? How does it contrast with Jesus' first journey? Thinking about this might prompt us to be more aware of the needs of children today, across the world and also nearer to home.
- The Psalms depict God as our refuge (e.g. Psalm 34:22). What can you learn from today's refugees (perhaps some you know locally, or voices you find online) to help you understand this picture of God more deeply?
- Would there ever be a case today for disobeying the ruling authorities, as the Magi did? Can you think of any examples?

Reflecting the Light

Where does more light need to shine?

- In Session 2, we thought about 'story telling', sharing parts of our spiritual journey with others. If you're engaging with this course in a group, you could do more of that, or see if anyone has had experiences of sharing their story outside the group during the past week.
- God's coming to us in the birth of Christ involves risk and danger. How does love prompt you to take risks? Where will that God-given impulse take you this week?
- Do you know anyone who has been suffering unjustly recently? Perhaps you can think of a practical way to express more support and love to them - and even to those who have done them wrong.
- In today's world, millions are refugees, fleeing from violence, poverty, lack of hope and now the effects of climate change. The numbers are likely to increase. One response is hostility; another is hospitality. How can you help your church to respond wisely? What about your local and national government?

Enrichment

Soon after he embraced Christian faith, TS Eliot wrote a poem called 'Journey of the Magi'. He depicts the Magi returning home, but no longer feeling at home in their old culture; Eliot reflects on his own struggle to let aspects of his old life 'die', so that Christ's new life can be born in him.

The Journey of the Magi. T.S.Eliot

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon

Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

There are some other online resources which you might find helpful if you are able. Visit https://www.lightsforchrist.uk/trlight-part-3

- Video –The Journey of the Magi by T.S. Eliot - read by Tim Martin
- Video - Lumo, Matthew 2:13-23
- Video - Building a safe space for refugees - Faith in action - Church of England
- Song -Our God was a refugee - Joel Payne (c) 2017 Resound Worship.
- Song -The Kingdom of God - Taizé Community - A song based on Romans 14:17.

For more ideas on how churches can respond, see the Church of England toolkit https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/community-action/toolkit-supporting-afghan-refugees

Prayer

A pilgrimage prayer

Dear Lord, you called your disciples to follow in your way:
You are the Way, the Truth and Life.
So we come, seeking to follow in your footsteps.

Creator of the earth, as we journey
Help us to walk lightly, treasuring the world you have given us,
And cherishing each other.

And grant, we pray, that our walk
May be part of your plan to care for creation.
Seeking climate justice and the coming of your Kingdom
On earth as it is in heaven.

Christian Concern for One World



Winter Wander

For this week's walk in your neighbourhood, why not look out for those who are on the move. Pray for any pedestrians, cyclists and drivers you notice. A smile or a helping hand might open up a conversation. If your walk takes you down a street where asylum seekers and refugees live or gather, pray for them and the church's ministry among them. Pray for travelling companions: groups beyond the church who are allies in that ministry.

Next Session

PART 4: GOD COMES TO US

A 4-part journey through Advent designed to be used in small groups or individually – helping us to shine as Lights for Christ

Travelling Light

Part 4

GOD COMES TO US

THE DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD
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PART 3 – GOD COMES TO US

"Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth" — PSALM 96:12B-13

Starting Out

'Advent' means 'coming': it's a season when the church thinks about the first coming of Jesus at Bethlehem and also his future second coming at the culmination of history. In this Advent course, we have been noticing the comings and goings of various characters in the biblical drama. Now we focus on the central point of these events: God coming to be in this world, alongside human beings.

Q. Think about one or two key moments in your own journey of faith. **Do you tend to feel that you moved and found God? Or that God somehow came and found you? (Or perhaps you might describe it in other terms.)**

If you are using this course in a group, you might talk about this experience with someone else.

Receiving the Light

What can we learn from the Bible's travellers?

Read Luke 1:57-80

The gift of a child has come out of the blue to Elizabeth and Zechariah – for them, as for Mary earlier in this chapter, this was totally unexpected, a sign to them and others of God's great mercy. Now as neighbours and family gather and are surprised to learn that the child's name is 'John', his father is liberated to speak again. Zechariah's prophetic proclamation/song looks to the future that the child will be part of – but first looks back to the story they are already part of, with all its comings and goings. Like Mary's song, Zechariah's is full of allusions to the scriptures he knew.

- Their ancestor Abraham, a wandering migrant, received divine blessing and the gift of a covenant relationship (Luke 1:72-73; if time allows, read Genesis 12:1-3; Genesis 17:1-8).

- Moses is not named here, but mention of being redeemed and saved from enemies in order to serve God (Luke 1:68, Luke 1:71) might well prompt memories of Moses leading the people out of slavery in the exodus, their journey to freedom (for a summary of the book of Exodus, see Psalm 77:11-20)

- David, Israel's most revered king, also comes into view, along with the many prophets who proclaimed God's message down the years. God came to each of them in turn, through words and actions (1 Samuel 16:13; 2 Samuel 7:1-6, 2 Samuel 7:16; Jeremiah 1:4-10).

Now, at this central moment in history, God arrives on the scene in a unique and decisive way. Elizabeth and Zechariah's son will announce the advent of this same God, coming to his people in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:76-77; compare John 1:14 and Philippians 2:5-11).

Although Jesus has not yet even been born, God's purpose is so certain that Zechariah can announce it as already having happened (Luke 1:68-69). Yet he also speaks of a future divine 'visit', using similar words (Luke 1:78). God has come and God will come.

God comes upon Zechariah as he is filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:67); later, as Luke continues the story, we see this happen to the church, at Pentecost and again on subsequent occasions (Acts 1:8; Acts 2:4; Acts 4:31). Through the words and actions of the church, God comes to more and more people, across the world and down the centuries.

Finally, in the culmination of all these divine appearances in the world, Jesus Christ will return in person, the ultimate act of God's judgement and saving grace (Acts 1:11; Matthew 25:31-32; 1 Corinthians 4:5).

- Is there a phrase in this session's Bible passage which captures your attention? If so, reflect on it, pray into it, see where it takes you. If you are doing this course as part of a group, you might like to share this with another person.

- What do you notice about God in Zechariah's prophecy? What is God like? What does God do?

- Why do you think God keeps coming to successive generations? Is coming once not enough?

- Christians believe that we are part of God's story, spanning the centuries and continuing on from today into the future. How does that idea make you feel?

Walking in the Light

How might we travel more wisely today?

- Zechariah's prophecy is sometimes called the 'Benedictus', from the Latin for its opening word, 'blessed'. Blessing is about freely and generously giving your best, proclaiming good things to another whom you love; for us to bless God means giving God our thanks and praise. Let's give ourselves to God in praise and thankfulness more and more as we pray.
- God's salvation involves forgiveness and directs us to walk in the way of peace (Luke 1:77, Luke 1:79). Is there anyone you want to be reconciled with this Christmas? If so, pray for ways in which that relationship might be healed and that burden lifted.
- If you are buying or wrapping gifts for others this week, look for ways to minimise the amount of throwaway packaging. Take a moment to delight in the privilege and fun of being able to give; and pray that whatever you give will warm the hearts of those who receive it.
- As we come to the turn of the year, this is a good time to consider a personal Rule of Life, as a framework to help you grow in Christ-likeness. If you already have one, you might like to refresh it - do you want to add a new environmental commitment? For more ideas on this, download our 'Introduction to environmental pledges'

Reflecting the Light

Where does more light need to shine?

- Learning verses of scripture can give us resources to feast on during the day, even when we don't have a bible to hand. Why not try learning Luke 1:78 (and perhaps the verse that follows), then revisiting it as you come and go during your week.
- God's compassion is emphasised in this passage (Luke 1:72, Luke 1:78). As we become more like the God we follow and worship, compassion grows within us. Who does that compassion lead you towards this week? You might think of someone who finds this time of year sad and dark, particularly as they remember someone who is no longer around.
- Luke repeatedly shows the Holy Spirit enabling and empowering people to speak out for God. Does that encourage you as you think of sharing your faith with others? Can you think of an occasion when you sensed God the Holy Spirit helping you to do this?



God's coming brings joy (Luke 1:14, Luke 1:44, Luke 1:47, Luke 1:58; Luke 2:10). See if you can pause, to experience afresh God's presence with you and that joy which God brings. Then look for a way to spread the joy – perhaps to someone who is finding this season too frenetic.

Enrichment

There are some other online resources which you might find helpful if you are able. Visit https://www.lightsforchrist.uk/trlight-part-4

- Song - Hear the song of our lament © 2020 Resound Worship.
- Song - Kima Otung performs Christian Aid's "When out of Poverty is Born." Lyrics by Kathy Galloway.
- Song -Meredith Andrews - Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.
- Video -Lumo Project - Luke 1:57-80.

Prayer

A pilgrimage prayer

Dear Lord, you called your disciples to follow in your way:
You are the Way, the Truth and Life.
So we come, seeking to follow in your footsteps.

Creator of the earth, as we journey
Help us to walk lightly, treasuring the world you have given us,
And cherishing each other.

And grant, we pray, that our walk
May be part of your plan to care for creation.
Seeking climate justice and the coming of your Kingdom
On earth as it is in heaven.

Christian Concern for One World



Winter Wander

If you go for a walk this week, try turning a verse or phrase from this week's Bible passage into a prayer for the people and places where you live. For example, you might ask God to 'guide our feet into the way of peace'. You could also sing one of the songs from the 'Enrichment' section as you go. If you or others have been distributing cards and invitations to Christmas events, you might like to re-walk those particular streets and pray for people to respond to the invitations.

We hope you enjoyed travelling with us this Advent - we value your feedback

This course was written by Bill Goodman, with support from Hannah Sandoval, produced online by Graham Sandersfield - contact lightsforchrist@sheffield.anglican.org

Related resources

Visit https://www.lightsforchrist.uk/ for selected resources that will help you to receive, walk in and reflect the light of Christ in your everyday life including youth, children and families resources.