

# **Lincoln Methodist Circuit**

**Lectionary 2017/18**

## **“Holy Habits”**

**A series on discipleship**

**based on the book by Andrew Roberts**

**Quarter 2 part 1 – Advent**

## Notes for Preachers – Q2 2017/18

### Pt 1 – Notes for Advent

#### Introduction

You should have had a letter with the Plan to explain the ideas for this quarter, but just in case you haven't heard we thought that it would make sense to ensure continuity over the Advent, Christmas and New Year/Covenant service period by producing brief notes that pick up the first quarter's theme of the nature of discipleship.

We have taken the main characters of the nativity story and linked them to aspects of discipleship including God as the Giver and Source of discipleship. We have also included small group notes and a set of Advent prayers that churches might want to use as they light Advent candles.

The lectionary will have readings listed for Advent. We have used passages from Isaiah that link to the week's theme **and** each week it would be good to reference back to Circuit vision as appropriate.

It may be you already have a clear idea of what you should preach on in Advent: these notes are not meant to be part of the "definitive" Holy Habits lectionary but we thought they might be helpful if you are working out your preaching.

The January and February notes will be ready by the end of November.

Dec 3 <sup>rd</sup> Advent 1	Mary and Joseph		The risk of being called to discipleship (adventure)	Starting out from the familiar, Misunderstanding
Dec 10 <sup>th</sup> Advent 2	The wise men		The cost of being called to discipleship (suffering)	Travel. Inconvenience, gifts
Dec 17 <sup>th</sup> Advent 3	The shepherds		The joy of discipleship	Joy, awe. worship
Dec 24 <sup>th</sup> Advent 4	God		The Giver	The cost to God the Father
Dec 25 <sup>th</sup>	Jesus		The Gift	The baby who is King, the king who became a baby

## Dec 3<sup>rd</sup> - Advent 1

### Mary and Joseph – the risk of being called to discipleship

Luke 1:26-45 New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

#### ***The birth of Jesus foretold***

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

<sup>34</sup> 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called <sup>1</sup>the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.'

<sup>38</sup> 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'? Then the angel left her.

#### ***Mary visits Elizabeth***

<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'

---

<sup>1</sup> :Luke 1:35 Or: So the child to be born will be called holy,

## **Matthew 1:18-25** New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

Joseph accepts Jesus as his son

<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about <sup>2</sup> his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet <sup>3</sup> did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus<sup>4</sup> because he will save his people from their sins.'

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him 'Immanuel'<sup>5</sup> (which means 'God with us').

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

### **Some OT texts about the appearance of angels**

Daniel 8:15-17 Gabriel appears to Daniel and his reaction seems to have been even more fearful than Mary's! – God's call can be challenging if not downright scary.

Genesis 16:7-10 - Another example of an angel giving challenging instructions.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew 1:18 Or :The origin of Jesus the Messiah was like this*

<sup>3</sup> *Matthew 1:19 Or: was a righteous man and*

<sup>4</sup> *Matthew 1:21 Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means the LORD saves.*

<sup>5</sup> *Matthew 1:23 See Isaiah 7:14*

## **A few thoughts:**

As she was growing up Mary probably wondered about who she would marry, what her adult life would be like. She had just reached the point where this question seemed to have been answered; she was to be married to Joseph. Then the course of her life is thrown into question once again. She has some reassurance of the ability of God to transform lives in unexpected ways through the experience of Elizabeth. (Do we see the same evidence [even in a more limited way] in the experience of those around us?)

For Elizabeth it is almost clearer still. She understands Mary's situation and status straightaway because she has already had her own experience of God's intervention as she carries John. (Previous experience of God's actions in our lives can provide a sense of security when we need to take risks.)

Joseph on the other hand initially viewed Mary's pregnancy in a more earthly way. He intended to sort out the situation as best he could. (It is easy to make the mistake of trying to sort things out for ourselves when stepping back and giving God room to work is the better option) It took divine intervention to guide him into the correct actions.

The immediate trust of Mary and the more hesitant trust of Joseph would carry them through the most unexpected and sometimes precarious lives. Meetings with magi, escape into Egypt, losing their son and finding him in the temple. Losing him on the cross and finding him again in the garden of Gethsemane.

It's unlikely that our own lives will be so remarkable but they often have twists and turns that we never could have expected. It is also unlikely that angels will appear to tell us how things will work out in advance. Or is it? An angel is simply one of God's messengers.

We have the benefit of learning through scripture from God's greatest messenger of all, Jesus. In being a disciple, we can be enabled and empowered to trust to God's message in our lives no less than Mary and Joseph trusted his message in theirs.

## Group material for Advent 1

We don't always think of Mary and Joseph as being "disciples" At first thought it might even seem to be impossible to be "followers" of someone who was not yet been born.

Read **John 1:1-5**

*Who is John writing about? Once you feel you have the answer to that, hold that thought in mind as you read **Luke 1:26-38***

We recognise the importance of being disciples of Jesus, not simply because it means following his teaching and example, but because it means following The Word of God. Mary and Joseph were following The Word of God in a very direct way, even before Jesus was born, to bring his teaching and example to the rest of the world.

*How does Mary hear The Word of God? You might not receive God's message through an angel but how else can you be open to what God has planned for you?*

Mary is understandably upset at first. Her life seemed to be running along so well. Engaged to Joseph, a reliable workingman, excited about the wedding and her new life as a married woman. Then, completely without warning, her future is turned upside down. *Has anything like this happened to you or someone you know, even if not so dramatically? How did you/they feel at the time?*

As well as the direct reassurance from the angel Mary had the benefit of her Jewish faith and soon gets to see God at work in the life of her elderly relative Elizabeth. Read **Luke 1 v39-45**

The positive reaction from Elizabeth must have helped Mary come to terms with what was happening. *Thinking back to the difficult times you have known, were there people whose experiences or reactions helped you? Have you been able to offer advice and support to others?*

Mary was able to accept the challenge that following The Word of God had placed upon her.

Of course it was not just Mary who would have been shocked by the news that she was to have a baby. Joseph's world would have been turned upside down too. Read **Matthew 1 v18-25**

*What was Joseph's first response?*

Joseph's reaction was very typical in trying to sort things out for himself; we often have a tendency to do the same. Once God's Word was revealed to him, this time in a dream, he followed the directions and accepted that God had a plan in which he would also play a part.

*Can you think of later points in their lives when Mary and Joseph would have to trust in God's plan? (You might look at Luke 2 v43-46, Matthew 2 v13, Mark 3 v31-35 and John 19 v25-27)*

Joseph and Mary were disciples in that they followed God's Word throughout their lives despite the difficulties and sadness that were an inevitable part of the experience. But we must not forget that they would also have shared enormous joy and amazement at the achievement of the boy they had raised together. To end the session on a high note read **Acts 1 v12-14**

## Dec 10<sup>th</sup> – Advent 2

### The Wise Men - the cost of being called to discipleship

**Aim:** The cost of being called to discipleship (suffering)

**Content:**

Travel, inconvenience, gifts

**Scriptures:**

**OT:** Isa 43 v1-3

**Gospels:** Matt. 2 v1-12 Also, consider Matt. 16 v24-26 and Matt. 7 v13-14

#### A few thoughts

Idea of our discipleship as a journey.

Draw parallels with the journey of the Wise Men.

What was the purpose of their journey? Why did they set out on it? Were they “called”?  
How were they called?

What would their journey have been like?

Long..... or short?

Easy, or difficult? Would people be suspicious of them and their motives? How would they deal with the fact that they would be travelling through different countries, with different laws and customs? And they would be entering occupied territory when they entered Israel!

What risks might they have faced on the journey? Wild animals, bandits?

Would it have been comfortable? Would it have been safe?

Did they have to face and overcome ridicule from the people around them when they announced they were off to follow a star?

How does our Christian journey parallel theirs? What risks, dangers and costs do we face?

What effects do our choices to follow where God leads have on *our* lives?

What are the benefits and rewards of taking that path?

The Wise Men had gone off in search of a new king. They *expected* to find him in a palace, but the palace knew nothing of the birth. When they *did* find Jesus, he was an ordinary baby, with poor, working class parents.

What they found wasn't what they had expected to find. The journey didn't lead where they thought it might. What sort of sense did it make?

Yet they knew, at the end, that God had called them, and that He had guided them, and that He continued to guide them, as, through the ministry of an angel, they were warned NOT to go back to Herod.

Was the end result worth all the privation of the journey?

How is God with *us* on *our* journeys of discipleship?

How, and in what ways are we called?

Some are called to great things – to travel the world, be involved in high profile, highly public ministries, which might take them all over the place and make them well known, like Billy Graham, whilst some are called to work out their discipleship in much humbler ways, staying local, serving quietly, never being known or noticed beyond the local context. Called to offer different gifts to the king of kings.

Has our Christian journey led us to the things we thought it might?

Think about the "Covenant Prayer"... Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing put me to suffering. Let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty etc.....

The Wise Men deliberately *chose* to take the path they did. Sometimes we get a choice, sometimes we don't!

What about sickness and illness. Disability, increasing age, infirmity and, perhaps, injury. What about natural disasters – earthquake, famine, drought? Or crime, terrorism, war...

How is the way we respond to *these* things part of our walk of discipleship?

How do we, can we, know God's presence with us in and through all of these?

How can we, - can we – find God *in* them, or despite them?

What can we offer to God, in and through them?

## **Ideas for Creative activity:**

### **Young children**

Show a map and pick 2 points e.g. Lincoln and London. Ask how far it is between them? (156 miles). How would they choose to travel between the places?

Now, show a map of the Middle East, and ask how far it is between Baghdad to Bethlehem. (545 miles) How would you make a journey like that?

Who would choose to go by car? By bus? Train? Plane?

Would anyone choose a camel? That's how the Wise Men did it!

Talk about the type of terrain they would have faced.

Long, hard journey, but undertaken to take gifts to the baby Jesus, who they believed was going to be a great king!

We know, now that Jesus is the greatest King of all, and that *He* is God's gift to us!

The Wise Men spent time looking for Jesus. Wise people still look for Him now, and when we find Him, we find God, offering us His love, friendship and forgiveness. This Christmastime, whilst you're excited about what's coming in a few weeks, and making all your preparations, don't forget that Jesus is the reason we celebrate, and make space for Him in all of your festivities.

### **Creative Worship**

E.g. Prayers? – Think about what we can offer to God as part of our discipleship. (Time, money, service given to others, hospitality, etc....) Write it on a piece of paper, and gather the pieces of paper together. Put them all together in a small gift box or wrap a plain box in gift paper, and offer it, with all the pieces of paper as part of the prayers. Alternatively, in all age worship, each person could make his or her own gift for offering to God.

## **Group material for Advent 2**

Talk about what effects our choices to follow where God leads, have on our lives.

Do they, should they affect our material wealth.

Could they affect job prospects, promotions, friendships?

Sacrificial living is part and parcel of Christian Discipleship. It is different from accepting suffering that comes our way just because we are human beings, living in an imperfect world, where bad stuff happens! How?

What blessings can we find as we follow the path of sacrificial living? How does God reveal himself to us as we take that path?

How does God sanctify “ordinary” suffering, and how can we find Him in it?

People might be encouraged to share their own stories of some of the above.

## **Dec 17<sup>th</sup> - Advent 3**

### **The Shepherds' Joy**

**Aim:** To understand why Jesus' birth was a cause of great joy in the Shepherds, and still is joyful Good News for us today.

#### **Content:**

Shepherds in the time of Jesus.

What did the Angel say about why Jesus' birth was Good News?

How the shepherds reacted to the news.

#### **Potential Scriptures:**

**OT:** Isaiah 40 v 1-11.

**Gospels:** Luke 2 v 8-20.

#### **Some thoughts about content and progression to act as help (not a blueprint!)**

- Shepherds were low status individuals at the time of Jesus. They had an isolated and dangerous job, which kept them out in the fields and away from "society" in the towns/villages, and also away from religious observances.
- The Angel announces Good News and gives the Shepherds a very detailed insight into which the new arrival is. He is a Saviour, who is going to be Messiah and Lord. Each of these titles/roles would have been highly politically charged in this time of Roman occupation of the Holy land. Plenty to unpack here!
- The Shepherds were unlikely recipients of this announcement. God seems to be deliberately pointing out that his message is Good News to everyone, not just to Kings and high status people.
- We as individuals are under occupation too before we hear about Jesus' arrival. Not from the Romans, but from the sinful self-centredness that separates us from God. The Messiah can save us from this too, so his advent is Good news for us too.
- The Shepherds went to see Jesus and (v17-18) "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them".
- When we've heard the joyful news will we be messengers/witnesses spreading the word too?

**Idea for Creative worship:**

Why not use the tune Cranbrook by Thomas Clark – better known as the tune for “On Ilkley Moor Baht 'at” – for “While Shepherd’s watched their flocks”? This was a “usual” tune for the carol before the currently better-known ones, “Winchester Old” and “Lyngham”

**Quote:** “Joy of heaven to earth come down” (Charles Wesley, Love Divine)

### **Group material for Advent 3**

**Icebreaker:** Can you think of and share a time when you received good news? What was the good news and how did it affect you?

*Read Luke2: 8-20*

Explain that Shepherds were considered lower class, poor members of society, partly because the fact that they needed to stay in the fields where the sheep were meant that they couldn't observe the religious duties expected of a Jewish person at the time.

**Why, then, did God choose Shepherds to be the first to hear the good news about Jesus' birth?**

The angel in verse 10 the angel says that they bring "good news that will cause great joy for all the people." And in verse 11 this good news is explained to be the birth of a Saviour.

**What words are used to describe this Saviour?**

These lowly shepherds belonged to a society under Roman Occupation. **What would these descriptions have meant to the Shepherds in this context? Why was this Good News for them?**

**Is the Angels' Good News the same for us today? Does it bring us great joy?**

**What do the shepherds do as soon as the Angels leave? Why?**

Think back to the good news you shared in the icebreaker. **When you heard this good news did you share it with anyone? How can you share the great Good News about Jesus with others?**

*Prayer and worship:*

Spend time:

- Giving thanks that God still brings us "good news of great joy".
- Praying that we will let the joy of Jesus live in us and be seen by those around us.

## **Dec 24<sup>th</sup> - Advent 4**

### **God the Giver**

**Aim:** to help us understand the Origins of the Gift of Discipleship

**Content:** - God's grace in making us disciples  
- What it cost him

**Scriptures:** John 13 v13-21, Isaiah 9:1–7

**See also :** John 1:1-18, John 17 v1-5, Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 6:23, Romans 8 v32 (all quotes are NIV UK)

**A Meditation –God's gift and discipleship** (You might find this helpful in your preparation: will be included with the separate Group Notes)

Discipleship is not about simply following a creed or a set of ideas: it is about following someone's example. It is not about learning from a textbook: it is about learning from the words of a teacher. It is not about adhering to a set of rules but about matching someone's approach to life. Disciples must have someone to follow.

The opening of John's gospel makes it clear that Jesus has always been in the world. His influence runs back through the Old Testament to before time existed. But before his birth, before he became flesh, his influence was harder for humans to identify.

God's gift of His Son to the world changed all that. It was a birth that transformed all of our lives; without Christ we could not be Christians, would not be disciples.

In order for the gift to be delivered, infinite power was replaced with the complete vulnerability of a newborn infant. In the child who grew into a man God was revealed with a depth of truth that the temple, for all its magnificence could not match.

The gift was perfect on so many levels: freely given out of love, desperately needed, of incalculable value. Its consequences were beyond measure – the turning point of reconciliation between God and humankind, the opening of a door to eternal life for all who knocked.

What did the gift cost? The God who shows infinite love must also be able to feel infinite pain and grief. Yet the gift was given in the full knowledge that human birth leads to human death. This human birth, for all the tenderness in the stable would lead to agonising suffering before death on the cross.

It is still a gift that can transform us all, just as John was immediately transformed from Old Testament style prophet into the first disciple of Jesus. He became a prototype to each of us in his witness to the need for redemption in this world. Redemption made possible by the gift of the birth and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus in this world, the world where he taught and set an example and where God is revealed to us in him today.

## **Introduction**

So far we have thought about the “what” and “how” of discipleship: God’s leading, our call to follow Jesus rather than an ideology, what the aims and consequences of our discipleship are in terms of joy, suffering and expectations of what God will do through us. But we have “taken as read” that we are disciples without looking at the very basis of our discipleship – God’s grace in sending Jesus as his “indefinable gift “ (2 Cor 9v15). Which seems a good theme for Christmas Eve!

## **Ideas**

### **Isaiah 9 v1-7**

- ‘Walking in darkness, living in the shadow of death’ – a possible link back to suffering as a result of living in a broken world.
- “A great light” (cf John 1 v7-9, 8 v12) – resulting in:
  - Joy (v3),
  - Freedom from oppression (v4)
  - Peace (v5).
- Because a child is born.

(As often happens in prophecy the earthly and eternal futures run into each other in v 6-7),

### **John 3 v13-17**

- But why the light, the child?
  - Because of God’s love v16 so that we might become daughters and sons of God (Gal 4v4) – resulting in

- Joy (Luke 2 v10, John 15v11, 16v24, Gal 5 v22)
- Freedom from sin (Romans 6 v22-23) – both its guilt and its oppression
- Peace with God ((Romans 5 v1)
- ‘This is grace – 1 John 4 v9-10 “Love to the loveless shown”

### **John 17 v1-5**

God is a God who gives.

- The Father gave the Son authority
- The Father gave us to the Son
- The Son gives us eternal life – which Jesus defines as his disciples “Knowing you and knowing me”
- The Son gives glory to the Father and the Father gives glory to the Son
- The Son gives us blessing, grace, truth knowledge of the father (John 1 v16-18)

So we know:

- God has given us the very best he has and is – himself, his Son
- He even gives us the faith we need to receive the gift of grace (Ephesians 6 v23)
- And that means we can be certain that he is the giver who gives on giving (Romans 8 v32)

And so: (John 14 v9-14)

- We love him and want him to go on loving us
- We follow him, because when we want to be with the one we love
- We long to be like him so want to do what he tells us to do
- We love each other because that is what he wants
- We know his joy
- We are disciples

The team pray that you as preachers will this Christmas come to know even more of the joy of the gift we can never know in all his fullness, that through you joy will flood into your hearers and through them and us flow out into the world that God loves so much

Happy Christmas!

Chris, David, David, Ian and Tim

## **Group material for Advent 4**

Think for a moment about the most valuable gift that you have ever given to someone. What it was is not the important thing; the question to ask yourself is why you gave it?

At Christmas time we are usually both givers and receivers of gifts. It is rare for us to give a gift and not to get one back in exchange: parents even buy gifts to give themselves from their young children! The only common exceptions are donations to our chosen charities.

But the origin of all this gift giving is, of course, a “one-way” gift and one of infinite value.

### **Read Malachi 3:1-4**

There are 2 people referred to in the first verse – who might they be?

The promise that the Lord will “come to his temple” (NIV) has both a literal meaning and a personal spiritual significance for all Christians – can you see what this is? If not you could try putting the question to your group leader or even your minister!

Have you ever received a present that turned out to be really hard work, like an exercise bike or a pair of running shoes? Verse 2 shows that acceptance of God’s gift by humankind will not necessarily bring an easy life but the results will be worthwhile in the end.

As well as thinking how the Christmas story is significant for us, we can try (in our very limited, human way) to look at the events from God’s point of view.

### **Read John 1:1-14**

The first 5 verses show that bringing Jesus into the world, as a gift to us all, was not something God needed to do for His own benefit. God is fully self-sufficient and always has been. The same applies to Jesus. **Read Colossians 1:15-17**

Going back to John’s gospel, verses 6-9. Can you see here any clues as to why the gift was so badly needed?

Who were “his own” people (Verse 11) that chose not to receive him? Are there parallels in the modern world?

What changes does John point out for those who believe?

As our creator, God has always completely understood humans and knows us even better than we know ourselves! In Jesus, God provided us with a physical demonstration of the way that knowledge extends across the whole of human experience. Life that started out with a mother's love in the stable ended in agony on the cross and included the full range of human emotion. Without the example of Jesus living in the world we could not be his disciples.

The true cost to God's of His gift to humankind that first Christmas might well be beyond what we are able to understand. It formed part of a mysterious process that could only be completed through wretched death and jubilant resurrection. You might like to reflect on the idea that our God who shows infinite joy and love must also be able to feel infinite pain and grief.

**Read Colossians 1:19-23** Paul was one of the first great disciples of Jesus – Do his words help you see Christmas from God's point of view?

A final thought....we are made in God's image and so the most straightforward explanation of God's great Christmas gift (which made our discipleship possible) could well be the same as why we might, ourselves, give a gift of great value – the greatest gifts are often given simply out of pure love!

Happy Christmas!