# Fourth Sunday of Advent: Goodness revealed

*And when they came to Bethlehem,
Where our dear Saviour lay,
They found him in a manger
Where oxen feed on hay;
His mother Mary, kneeling,
Unto the Lord did pray.
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy!*

**(‘God rest you merry, gentlemen’ from *Christmas Collection*, no.33)**

## Scripture:

* Luke 1:46-55 ‘And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as he promised our ancestors.’
* Romans 15:13 ‘May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.’

## Introduction

* It is difficult to imagine how Mary and Joseph must have felt during these days as new circumstances, experiences and insights were bombarding them constantly. There were visits from angels, shepherds and wise men, as well as possibly from family, and a visit to the Temple is recorded in Scripture.
* What is breathtakingly impressive is Mary’s openness and sensitivity to the presence of God through it all. Listening to what God is doing, when life is chaotic and personal circumstances are ever-changing, is challenging in the best of times. She listens, watches and ponders as she discerns what God is doing (Luke 2:19).
* Throughout Mary’s and Joseph’s individual – and now shared – experiences, they must have had deep faith in the goodness of God and his faithfulness, despite the hardship. In the same way, Paul’s prayer to the Romans was that God would fill them with all joy and peace as they trusted in him, overflowing with hope by the power of his Spirit (Romans 15:13). God can be relied on in all the various circumstances of our lives.

## Context

* Luke 1:38 is one of the most insightful verses in the New Testament.

It gives us an insight into Mary’s heart*.* She says, ‘I am the Lord’s servant …

May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her. This depicts Mary laying down her life for God and trusting his ways, even when she is afraid (Luke 1:29) and does not understand what is happening to her and what is going on.

* Later, as the ministry of Jesus unfolds in the Gospels, we note that most of the disciples struggled to exhibit the same depth of spiritual maturity, often being more concerned about their status and role among events in Jesus’ life. Mary, by contrast, placed herself at God’s disposal and relegated her own interests in favour of God’s purposes. Remember that she was no more than a young girl, indicating that spiritual wisdom is not necessarily related to age.
* Mary’s song of praise, which we call the Magnificat (from the first word in the Latin version), is a statement of surrender and trust from a young woman whose deep spiritual maturity belies her years. Mary provides us with an example of a totally surrendered life, content to allow God his way whatever the outcome.

## Reflection – looking inwards

* How do we live a surrendered life and consciously look and listen for what God is doing in the often chaotic and confusing circumstances of life? Perhaps this requires ‘letting go’ of the past, or of our need to be in control of everything, or of an experience that has hurt us. The dilemma we face may involve laying down our need to ‘make things happen’ and quietly and reflectively trusting God and ‘allowing things to happen’. Is it down to me to make things happen?
* Whilst Mary gives us a brilliant example of it, the most sublime picture of surrender is surely the child in the manger. Becoming utterly powerless and helpless, as all babies are, God chose this entry route to commence his new mission in the world. As we gaze on the powerlessness of the all-powerful God, we might ask ourselves, ‘Is this picture of vulnerability and dependence an insight into the life of disciples of Jesus?’
* The word ‘gaze’ suggests thoughtfulness, enquiry, wonder and reflection, as opposed to simply ‘look’ or ‘glance’ which may be much more short-lived expressions. What are we seeing as we gaze at the Christ-child? What are we learning about the vulnerability of God and how should we reflect this?

## Reflection – looking outwards

* As we consider ‘goodness revealed’ in the Christ-child, we come to understand that God’s love is for every person in the world. To think that salvation is offered merely at an individual level is missing the even grander purpose behind the coming of Jesus into the world. God wants to transform the whole world, its power structures that create social injustice and all the evil that arises as a result. God does not want anyone to perish – the job in mission is to get Heaven into everyone and everyone to be with God for eternal life.
* ‘The world for God’ was a theme for many of the early Salvation Army songwriters. Their vision of a world living in the reign of God inspired them to live as if that were the reality in the often challenging ‘here and now’.
* ‘Come, Lord Jesus’ is quite simply the meaning of Advent.

Joy Webb wrote a beautiful song called ‘[Come Into Our World](https://vimeo.com/477973842?share=copy)’.

Listen to the song and reflect on the true meaning of Advent.

## Prayer

**‘Come Into Our World’, Joy Webb**

Come into our world,

Come into our world,

now, Lord Jesus!

People sit in loneliness, children cry for bread;

Men fight men in hatred, by suspicion led;

And if we needed you, we need you now!

Come into our world,

Come into our world, now, Lord Jesus!

We make this prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.