

# CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE KEYHOLE

*Luke's glimpses of Advent*

DEREK TIDBALL



BRF Advent Book

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# Contents

Introduction .....	7
<b>Jesus – the hope of the needy</b> .....	11
3 December: Daughter of grace .....	12
4 December: Warrior God .....	15
5 December: Holy God .....	18
6 December: Merciful God .....	21
7 December: Searching God .....	24
8 December: Revolutionary God .....	27
9 December: Faithful God .....	30
<b>Jesus – the redeemer of the world</b> .....	33
10 December: Inspired song .....	34
11 December: Servant king .....	37
12 December: Promising prophets .....	40
13 December: Sacred covenant .....	43
14 December: Willing servants .....	46
15 December: Pioneering prophet .....	49
16 December: Radical salvation .....	52
17 December: Spreading light .....	55
<b>Jesus – the joy of the earth</b> .....	59
18 December: Angels .....	60
19 December: Glory .....	63

20 December: Heaven .....	66
21 December: Earth .....	69
22 December: Peace.....	72
23 December: Favour .....	76
<b>Jesus – the light of the nations</b> .....	79
24 December: Longing for salvation .....	80
25 December: The arrival of salvation .....	83
26 December: Witness to salvation .....	86
27 December: The transparency of salvation.....	89
28 December: The scope of salvation .....	92
29 December: The cost of salvation .....	95
30 December: Confirmation of salvation.....	98
<b>Jesus – the splendour of the creation</b> .....	101
31 December: In the beginning .....	103
1 January: The embodied Word.....	106
2 January: Firstborn of all creation.....	109
3 January: The pre-eminent one.....	112
4 January: God has spoken .....	115
5 January: The radiance of God’s glory .....	118
6 January: Worship Jesus.....	122
Notes.....	125

# Introduction

In our house, Christmas is always a time for music. We rejoice in going to concerts, buying new recordings of old carols with their familiar words and tunes, and equally welcome new compositions, or new collections of our favourite performers. Christmas without music is as inconceivable as Christmas without presents or turkey. Truth to tell, not all the old carols are good guides to the Christmas story. Some of them are shaped more by sentimentality and reflections of a later age than that of the first Christmas, while others contain some pleasant but misleading thoughts. Did baby Jesus really not cry, as 'Away in a Manger' claims? If he didn't, was he truly human? Were the Magi really three kings? And three ships sailing into land-locked Bethlehem is a little confusing. The original Christmas songs are better guides.

Soaked in the older scriptures of the Jewish people, the songs Luke records in his inspired Gospel – the songs of Mary, Zechariah, Simeon and the angels at Bethlehem – reveal the wondrous depths that for us 'in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah' (Luke 2:11, NIV). Their words are often those of the Old Testament; their style one of passionate yet reverent worship; their tone is one of humility; yet their rhythm indicates confident upbeat praise. To these songs we add, more briefly, the later reflective songs of John, Paul and Hebrews.

Let me ask a personal question. Do you like looking through keyholes? It is probably not the done thing to admit to such curiosity in polite company but the truth is that many of us are inquisitive. David Frost created a programme called *Through the Keyhole*, which took panellists around an anonymous celebrity's house, pointing

out various features of the home and examining special possessions with a view to their guessing whose house it was. Often participants and viewers alike were left amazed at the riches they saw and at the uniqueness of some of the possessions. The programme migrated through various TV channels, and after 20 years still drew an audience of five million viewers when it came back under a new presenter at the time Frost died. It's just one small example of how we love to explore what lies behind someone's front door.

This book invites us to treat the songs of the Saviour's birth as keyholes through which we can spy amazing things. As we peep through our metaphorical keyholes, our eyes don't immediately settle on a crib or a crying infant. They lead us first to view the whole story of God's dealings with Israel that has led to the arrival of the Saviour.<sup>1</sup> They lead us through pain, agony and failure to discover the faithful mercy of God who, in sending a baby to Bethlehem, gives hope to his people and the wider world. We get to the manger, but only after negotiating our way through a longer story first.

The contestants on the TV show were encouraged to pick up some of the individual possessions, turn them over, consider them carefully and appreciate their value before moving on, eventually piecing their discoveries together into a collective picture of the person who owned the house. We will do the same with the lines of the various songs, not in order to fragment them but in order to give us a far greater appreciation of them and the one who caused them to be sung.

I am aware that it is common to use these songs of the Saviour's birth as the basis for meditations at Advent. Several books have been published in this area and, indeed, I myself have touched on them a little on a previous occasion. For that reason I have not referred to any of these other publications and not even looked back at my one previous book of Advent meditations. My concern has been to spy anew the story of the first Christmas through the keyhole of these songs and see afresh the rich and wonderful vision they give.

Each day's comment concludes with a text on which the reader is encouraged to meditate. To meditate is to fill our minds with truth from God or about God and to chew it over in our thinking. Five questions, among others, may help us to get started in meditation.

- What does this text mean?
- What does it teach me about God?
- How far do I believe what it states?
- What difficulties do I have with this text and how can I overcome them?
- How does it apply to me today?

Meditation requires us to use our minds but it is not an academic exercise. It is a spiritual exercise; all our thoughts are thought in the presence of God and should be turned into prayer and worship before him.<sup>2</sup>



# Jesus – the hope of the needy

3–9 December

## The Magnificat: Luke 1:46–55

And Mary said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their  
hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

## 3 December

---

# Daughter of grace

**Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.  
And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and  
you will name him Jesus.**

LUKE 1:30-31

Read Luke 1: 26-45.

The songs that rise to the top of the charts today are often not original creations, but fresh recordings by new artists of songs that have been around for a good time. A new voice and new arrangements, instruments and technology give songs from long ago a new lease of life. Sometimes triggered by the personal experience of the new artist, they are creative re-presentations to communicate to a changing situation. So it was, in part, with Mary's song.

Mary is one of a long line of women in Israel for whom giving birth is the crucial issue. From Sarah, through Rachel and Hannah, down to cousin Elizabeth, we learn of several childless women who miraculously conceive and whose children not only bring joy to the family but go on to play a critical role in securing the future of Israel. Unlike these women, Mary is not infertile. She's a young, vulnerable teenager who is a virgin (Luke 1:27, 34). Since she has not yet married, her virginity is a virtue, not a matter of shame. No wonder she is confused and 'troubled' (NIV) when the angel Gabriel brought news of her conceiving a child. With apparently no one to turn to, she goes to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, who is also surprisingly pregnant, knowing that they would at least have something in

common. While she is there she bursts into song, the song we know as the Magnificat, because it glorifies the Lord.

Was Mary's song original? Not exactly. It shows great similarities to Hannah's song after she had given birth to Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1–10). Their songs celebrate God's gracious initiative in coming to the rescue of Israel through the birth of a child. Hannah's prayer 'represents a turning point in Israel's history. It closed an age which at times bordered on anarchy, a period of shame and humiliation... [and] opened the door to Israel's greatness.'<sup>3</sup> What happened under Samuel was merely a pointer to the greater achievements that would occur with the coming of Jesus.

Mary does not draw on Hannah's song alone. Line after line that cascades from her lips is drawn from the psalms, like Psalms 34, 35, 89 and 103. She may be young and female, and therefore probably uneducated, but she was obviously devout. These psalms would have been sung Sabbath after Sabbath in the synagogue in Nazareth and she had imbibed them deeply in her spirit. They had become a part of her. So, when the occasion arose, the appropriate words were all to hand and woven into a fresh new tapestry.

After the opening declaration ('My soul magnifies the Lord'), God is the subject of every sentence. The song does not boast that she is to become a mother, but rather that God, the Mighty One, is coming to the rescue, being merciful to Israel and proving faithful to his promise. We would have understood if the song expressed some angst about her sudden and unexpected condition. What would happen to her? What would people's reactions be? How would she cope? Yet the song is remarkably free from Mary's concerns and worries and is astonishingly focused on God. God must be the starting point for all our faith. If we have a wrong view of him, we will have a distorted and probably dysfunctional faith.

When she does briefly speak of herself, she is not the subject, not centre-stage. God remains the subject. He is the giver and she is the

surprising recipient of his grace. Her 'lowliness' isn't pseudo-humility but actual fact. From what we know of her, as a young teenage girl, she wasn't significant in other people's eyes. When you also consider that she must have been relatively poor, judging by the offering she and Joseph made in the temple (Luke 2:24) and that she came from that backwater, Nazareth, you get the picture that she really was insignificant. She didn't merit any particular attention. Without qualification or entitlement, God chose her to be the mother of his incarnate son. She was 'blessed' indeed, as God poured his grace into her life.

What a remarkable thing for God to do, to trust the salvation of the world to a vulnerable, unwed teenage girl and, eventually, to Joseph, who was probably nothing much to be proud of either as a low-skilled, manual labourer from Nazareth. But that's the extraordinary thing about God. He has always worked that way. He didn't choose Israel for their strength or size (Deuteronomy 7:7-9) and he doesn't choose us because we're somebodies, but rather because we're nobodies (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). Mary fits the picture. She is honoured because she is the daughter of God's amazing grace.<sup>4</sup>

Like Mary, we have no cause to boast in ourselves but only in the grace of God. I wonder if, like her, we're so steeped in scripture that we have the vocabulary to express the wonder of that grace.

## For reflection

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

MATTHEW 5:3

## 4 December

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# Warrior God

**For the Mighty One has done great things for me.**

LUKE 1:49

The song of the daughter of grace wells up from the depth of her being. Her song is no mere performance. It has not been honed, practised and rehearsed over the months leading up to the grand opening night. While it is orchestrated and conducted by the unseen Spirit of God, it genuinely expresses the devotion of her heart and mind. She speaks of her 'soul' magnifying the Lord and her 'spirit' rejoicing in God. This is not an invitation to debate what part of her is her soul or her spirit. Like much Hebrew poetry, the lines run parallel, with the second reinforcing the first rather than trying to say anything new. It simply means she is praising God with the whole of her being. She's fulfilling, fortissimo, the command of Psalm 103:1, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.'

Mary's opening words immediately make us aware of the ironic gulf she feels between her position and that of the one who has blessed her. She, the singer, is conscious of 'the lowliness' of her status as 'his servant', in contrast to the powerful status of the 'Mighty One' blessing her. Winston Churchill once apparently cruelly observed about Clement Atlee, his deputy during World War II (and after the war his successor as prime minister), 'Mr Atlee is a modest man. Indeed he has a lot to be modest about.' But this was Mary speaking not of someone else, but of herself. She had not expected anyone to take notice of her, still less the God of Abraham and of her ancestors. The people who God delights to bless are always those who, like

Mary, are not full of themselves and what they can offer to God, but those who come with empty hands for him to fill.

‘The Mighty One’ is simply ‘the powerful’ in the original Greek. He is dynamite (*dunatos* in Greek). As with all the descriptions of God Mary uses in the Magnificat, it is a term with a history. To speak of ‘the Mighty One’ was to speak of God as a warrior. It was a human way of speaking about the eternal God, but revealed him to be the one who intervened on behalf of his people Israel, the oppressed, the poor, the abused, the downtrodden and who stood up to bullies against injustice. God as a divine warrior is one of the central themes of the Old Testament. After their escape from Egypt, Israel rejoiced that, ‘The Lord is a warrior’ (Exodus 15:3). How else would they have been liberated from captivity? They certainly could not have done so relying on their own means. Down through the psalms and the prophets, Israel relied on God to fight for them, and on occasion found that God would, when they were living in disobedience, fight against them too. The theme wends its way down the years to Zephaniah’s time.

The Lord, your God, is in your midst,  
 a warrior, who gives victory;  
 he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
 he will renew you in his love;  
 he will exult over you with loud singing.

ZEPHANIAH 3:17

In the comfortable Western world, we have something of an uneasy conscience about military conflicts and fighting wars. Who wouldn’t rather use diplomacy and live in peace? But if we are among the many in our world for whom diplomacy doesn’t work, whose buildings are bombed by an enemy out to destroy us, whose territory is occupied by an illegitimate power and who are subjected to slavery, pillage and rape, we’d see it differently. We’d long for a strong power to fight for us and deliver us. Such is the God of Israel, and of Mary.

When Zephaniah penned his words of promise, towards the end of Judah's existence as a separate kingdom, it seemed highly unlikely that they would become reality. It appeared much more probable that they were just pious words or wishful thinking on the prophet's part. But, now, a teenage girl from Nazareth declares that the words remain true and are about to be fulfilled, not only in her own life but for her people Israel. God was on the march again, to set them free from Satan and all who serve his will of oppression and destruction.

As often, the personal story and the wider story intertwine. The primary 'great thing' God had done for Mary was to bestow on her the honour of giving birth, though she was a virgin, to the Messiah who would deliver Israel. Can you speak of the 'great things' God has done for you?

## For reflection

**Who is the King of glory?**

**The Lord, strong and mighty,**

**The Lord, mighty in battle**

PSALM 24:8

## 5 December

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# Holy God

### **Holy is his name.**

LUKE 1:49

‘What’s in a name?’ Juliet asked, protesting. ‘That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’<sup>5</sup> If names are arbitrary labels, Juliet was right. But in biblical times names were carefully chosen to express someone’s character and to say something that encapsulated a person’s identity. When Mary said of God ‘holy is his name’, she was not attaching a label to him but opening a window into his nature.

Black-and-white photos present their subjects by using a plain contrast in monochrome. Coloured photos, with their tints and shades, are often softer and subtler, but at the same time more complex in the eye of the beholder. The value of the black-and-white photo is that it confronts us with a clear, sharp picture. Holy is one of the Bible’s black-and-white words, especially when used, as it frequently is, of God. The essence of holiness lies in difference. What is holy is sacred, set apart from the ordinary, clean and unsullied, and of special worth. When cooking pots and utensils were used in the tabernacle or temple they may have looked like the ones people used at home, but they were reserved for exclusive use in the worship of God, and deserved special care and attention, especially in regard to their quality and cleanliness.

To say that God is holy means that he is not like us and does not share our limitations and imperfections. He is awesome in his



transcendent being. That's always the picture the holiness of God conveys. Yet a subject may be photographed from a number of different angles, so a number of its different aspects may be seen. So it is with our God's holiness.

When Mary proclaimed 'holy is his name', she was referring to God in his majesty. She was picking up the line before, where she had declared him 'the Mighty One', and nuancing it. She's drawing on the psalms, the hymnbook with which she'd have been familiar, like Psalm 99 which celebrates God as king, enthroned above the earth, 'exalted over all the peoples', great in the execution of his justice and righteous in all he does. The only logical response to such a God is to honour him in worship, to be awed by him and to sense our smallness, creatureliness and unworthiness. Rightly, therefore, the psalm invites people to 'Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!' (Psalm 99:5).

In her own, different way, through the visitation of the angel, Mary was experiencing what Isaiah did when he visited the temple, in the year of King Uzziah's death, and encountered God presiding over his world and breaking into it in all his splendour and majesty. There he heard the song of the attendants at God's throne calling to each other:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.

ISAIAH 6:3

Perhaps because of this formative experience, Isaiah's favourite title for God is that he is 'the Holy one of Israel', which he uses over 25 times. To begin with, it bears a moral meaning. God is holy in stark contrast to his people's sinfulness and they will bear the brunt of his judgement. But in his later writing the emphasis shifts from judgement to salvation, and 'the Holy One of Israel' is seen as the redeemer who will deliver people from exile in Babylon. Isaiah borrows from Israel's history of the first exodus, from Egypt, to

explain their future would lead to a second and greater exodus and to a new, purified remnant becoming a more glorious nation than before. This wouldn't come about by their own hands but through the intervention of their Saviour (Isaiah 43:3) and Redeemer (Isaiah 47:4; 48:17; 49:7) – the Holy One of Israel. Enemies and oppressors would come and abase themselves to Israel and their prosperity would make them the envy of the world (Isaiah 49:22–23; 55:5; 61:9).

As Israel's history unfolded, Isaiah's words only seem to have been partially fulfilled. Israel returned from exile under Cyrus, the Persian, but they struggled to rebuild a strong nation and never seemed to match the potential that Isaiah prophesied. But perhaps they were looking for the wrong sort of fulfilment. Mary believed that God was going to fulfil his promise and, somewhat astonishingly, that she would have a part in it. When her unique son, Jesus, began his ministry, people puzzled as to who he truly was. Those with access behind the scenes of the world, the demons, had no such quandary. They knew that he was 'the Holy One of God' (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). Eventually, the disciples agreed and came not only to believe but also to 'know' that Jesus was the Holy One of God himself in flesh and blood (John 6:69).

## For reflection

**For your Maker is your husband,  
the Lord of hosts is his name;  
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,  
the God of the whole earth he is called.**

ISAIAH 54:5

## 6 December

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# Merciful God

**His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.**

LUKE 1:50

Mary's emphasis so far in her song has been the power of God. That could be somewhat daunting, not to say disturbing. If he really is such a big and powerful God, how can it be that he doesn't crush his fallen and rebellious creation as a steamroller crushes a nut? Mary has already given us a few clues. He uses his power as a saviour. He looks with favour on the lowly. But the real answer, without any inconsistency, is that he is not only a God of mighty holiness but also a God of abundant mercy. Just as any coin has two sides but forms one coin, so Mary's song introduces us to the two sides of God's united character. 'His mercy,' she sings, 'is for those who fear him.'

We're often in need of mercy – the response of compassion, understanding, pity, forbearance, kindness and, above all, free pardon – when we mess up. When we fail to be the loving, reliable spouse, or fail to fulfil our obligations at work or school, or let the sports team down by our indiscipline, or even break the speed limit, or... or... (fill in the blanks), we long for mercy. We want others to be brought to justice, but somehow we ourselves would prefer mercy to justice, knowing that, in Shakespeare's perceptive words, 'Though justice be thy plea consider this, that in the course of justice none of us should see salvation: we do pray for mercy.'<sup>6</sup> Thankfully, God's might is balanced with, constrained by and channelled through – or, better still, blended with – his mercy.

Mary did not invent the mercy of God. Anyone who says that in the Old Testament we're presented with a God who is angry, whereas in the New Testament we have a different God who is loving and merciful, has clearly not read the Old Testament or the New. Mercy is spoken of over 400 times in the Old Testament. From Exodus 34:6 onwards, God reveals himself to be 'the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.' Mercy goes hand in hand with his steadfast love. Indeed, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint) translates 'steadfast love' as the Greek word for mercy. This steadfast, faithful, unfailing love takes us to the idea of the covenant.

The place where mercy is exercised is within the context of the covenant. We'll look into the covenant idea more next week. But a covenant is where we give ourselves to each other in a binding agreement, no matter what. God has entered into a covenant relationship with his people but it is not one between equal partners. He is God and we are his creatures. So God's promise to be our God entails our promise to obey his commands. And when we don't, it is possible, because he is merciful, for the broken relationship to be repaired. But it can never be repaired if we think our disobedience doesn't matter, or if our attitude is one of indifference or disrespect to him. That's why Mary says his mercy 'is for those who fear him'.

There is fear and fear, isn't there? Having lived for years by the sea I know there are those who fear it unhealthily and so never go near it. They cling tightly to the shore and consequently never know the enjoyment of swimming in it or sailing on it. That sort of cringing fear robs and represses a person. But a right fear of the sea is necessary if people are to find it a safe and life-giving environment rather than a life-robbing one. The sensible sailor does not put to sea without the proper equipment and appropriate clothing, or without having learned to navigate, to handle the boat and its instruments, and to consult the weather charts! Wise sailors fear the sea because they know its power and its potential dangers and show it proper

respect. So it is with God. To fear him is not to cringe before him in abject servility. But it is to take him seriously, to respect his person, to submit to his authority, to obey his commands and to live to please him. If we live like that, then, when we have need and know ourselves to be undeserving, we find mercy freely available.

God's mercy is not scattered abroad willy-nilly. It is channelled to those who belong to the covenant and fear him.

Mary may well have been echoing the words of Psalm 103:17–18:

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting  
on those who fear him,  
and his righteousness to children's children,  
to those who keep his covenant  
and remember to do his commandments.

In the birth of Jesus, God was being true to himself and 'remembering to be merciful' (Luke 1:54, NIV).

## For reflection

**For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.**

JAMES 2:13