

### Third prayer-time

Scripture Passage (Luke 1:34-38)

*Mary asked, 'How can this happen? I have never had sex with anyone.' Gabriel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come to you. The power of God who is over all will cover you like a shadow. So, your child will be special to God. He will be completely good. He will be called God's Son. Another thing! Your cousin, Elizabeth, is very old. People said that she could not have a baby. Listen! She also will have a son. The baby has grown inside her now for nearly six months. There is nothing that God cannot do.' Mary answered, 'I am the servant of the Lord. I have heard what you have said. I want it to happen to me just like that.' Then the angel left her.*

In all probability Mary was in her early teens. She lived in an unfashionable town, where nothing of note had ever happened. Mary was blessed by a miracle—it was probably not the kind of miracle that she had prayed for. Miracles are by their nature 'miraculous' but even Gabriel seems to marvel: 'There is nothing that God cannot do.' As you pray for strength to do God's will and work, bear that in mind.

O, great and mighty God, / Great In power and mighty in deed,  
Nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing, Nothing is too difficult for thee.

(Kay Chance)

### Fourth prayer-time

Scripture Passage (Luke 1:46-50, 54-55)

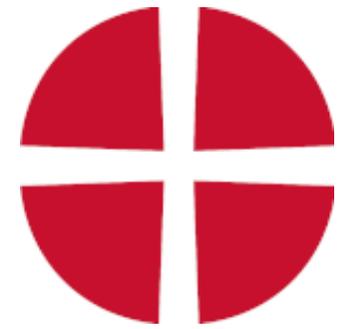
*Then Mary said, 'All of me wants to praise God and say, "Lord, how good and great you are!" I thank God because he is the one who saves me. I know that I am not an important person. God knows this, and he has been kind to me. Listen! From now on, all people will say that God has made me happy. Yes, God has done great things for me. He is very powerful and strong. He is good in every way. He is kind to people who respect him. He will always be kind to people like that. He promised that he would be kind to his people, Israel. Now he has come and helped them. He made a promise to Abraham and to our other ancestors. Now he has done what he promised.*

The Song of Mary (or *Magnificat* which was the Latin title) is one of several songs of praise dotted around the Bible. Praising God is more difficult than we might think for we so easily go into the language of thanksgiving without praising God at all. There is plenty of thanksgiving in Mary's son but don't miss the praise: 'Lord, how good and great you are! God ... is very powerful and strong. He is good in every way.' Offer a prayer of praise to God—if you are struggling or need to learn how to do it better use Psalms 145-150.

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath, / And when my voice is lost in death,  
Praise shall employ my nobler powers:  
My days of praise shall ne'er be past, / While life and thought and being last  
Or immortality endures.

(Isaac Watts, based on Psalm 146)

Quotations: HP 110 O come all ye faithful; HP 87 The angel Gabriel from heaven came; Ah! Lord God, Thou hast made the heavens; HP 439 I'll praise my Maker



## The Eighth Day! (5) 15-16 December 2020

### Introduction

*What is God saying to us during this time of restrictions? What do we as individuals, as a church, as a nation, want to say to God?*

More than 30 years ago, for it was when I was in my first circuit, the Methodist Church published a short leaflet about fasting and prayer. Believing that this was a biblical practice and something which had been a great blessing to the early Methodists, in the larger of my two churches we began organising regular days of fasting and prayer but then I moved to a new circuit and I must admit it has been a practice that I have neglected.

Two years ago, while on holiday in Northern Ireland, we were warmly welcomed to the *Transformation Centre*, Lisburn, by Pastor Nick Serb, his wife and family. It had been an encouraging morning service (Pastor Nick had preached powerfully on Romans 1) and we were pleased to share time with them. Earlier this year, Pastor Nick, who is from Romania, sent me a first draft of a book he is writing on Fasting and Prayer. It is an excellent book and I have been privileged to work through it and offer little corrections to Pastor Nick's excellent English, and make comments and suggestions, which he has graciously received.

One of the joys of lockdown (yes there have been some!) is to watch my college friend, Revd Steven Wild, each day as he presents his *Daily Reflections* on YouTube. Steve is working his way through the Sermon on the Mount and he spoke with some enthusiasm about Fasting and Prayer. On the day that the Prime Minister spoke to the nation and said we must endure a second lockdown I felt convinced that it was right to call the people of the Torbay Methodist Circuit and others who share in fellowship with us to a time of Fasting and Prayer.

I am sorry that *Think: Fasting and Prayer (A Seven Day Journey)* by Pastor Nick Serb will not be printed until 2021. However, I freely acknowledge that some of the ideas that I share here are drawn from Pastor Nick's book—but, of course, he is not responsible for what I am writing. I chose 'The Eighth Day' because over the years people have made the excuse that they would have joined in something but it was on the wrong day. The Eighth Day is one day later each week! It is also the day of resurrection and of new beginnings.

It was in about 1970 that I heard Duncan Campbell preach in the Bethel Mission, Plymouth. The auditorium was the Little Theatre. I was about 12 years old at the time but I remember the dodderly old man being enlivened as he spoke and the hall, which was well-filled with rowdy youths, falling strangely still. It is said that the revival in Christian faith in the Isle of Lewis, in the Hebrides, can be traced to the prayers of two elderly ladies.

<https://ctntp.uk/other-insights/the-intercessors-of-the-hebrides-revival/>

Fasting is the discipline of going without food for a (short) period of time. The invitation is to join with members of the Torbay Methodist Circuit and other friends to go without food from 10.00 pm one evening until 4.00 pm the following day. **You must not do this if it involves any health risk, you have an underlying health condition, are a diabetic or need to take medication with food.** If one or more factors prevents you from fasting you can still pray and you might choose to go without treats (such as biscuits or chocolate) for the duration of the fast. Also, if you would rather go from 6.00 pm until noon the following day then that is fine. **Most importantly, you should continue to have plenty to drink during the period of fasting and prayer. It is definitely not honouring to God to make yourself ill.**

### What is the point of fasting and prayer?

It is a spiritual discipline to show yourself and God you are truly serious about the things you are praying for—it gives time normally spent having meals and snacks to focus on prayer and your relationship with God. At these times, be sure still to have a cup of tea/coffee and/or a glass of water/juice. If you need food with medication then have a small piece of toast or a couple of plain biscuits. People fasting from 10.00 pm until 4.00 pm often have four times in the day that they would think about eating something—breakfast, mid-morning, lunch, mid-afternoon. Use these or four similar times to share in 15 minutes of prayer, reading, praise and ministry.

*Notes by John Haley*

### First prayer-time

Scripture Passage (Isaiah 7:10-14)

*The Lord spoke again to Ahaz. He said, 'Ask the Lord your God for a message. Ask for it deep in the earth or high in the sky.' But Ahaz said, 'I will never ask for a message or ask the Lord to do something.' And Isaiah said, 'Now listen, you descendants of David! You are making your people angry with you. And you are making God angry with you too. So the Lord himself will give a message to you. Look, the virgin will become pregnant. She will have a son and she will call his name Immanuel.*

Ahaz was one of Israel's most wicked kings but God spoke to him through the prophet Isaiah. The less-fashionable English word 'maiden' (meaning both young girl and virgin) would be a good translation. It seems as if the prophecy has 'layers of meaning' - an immediate fulfilment in ancient Israel and an ultimate fulfilment in the birth of Jesus to Mary. Matthew (1:23) is very clear that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. Pray that God will speak to you in a new way through these Bible passages.

God of God, light of light, / Lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb;  
Very God, begotten, not created: / O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

(From the Latin, trans. *Frederick Oakeley* and others)

### Second prayer-time

Scripture Passage (Luke 1:26-33)

*When Elizabeth's baby had grown inside her for nearly six months, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth. Nazareth is a town in Galilee. Gabriel went there to visit a young woman. Her name was Mary. She had never had sex with anyone. She had promised to marry a man called Joseph. He belonged to the family of King David. Gabriel went to Mary and said, 'Hello, Mary. The Lord God loves you very much. He is very near to you.' Mary had a lot of problems in her mind about what Gabriel said. She did not understand why he said it. 'Do not be afraid, Mary,' Gabriel went on to say. 'God has been kind to you. Listen! A baby boy will grow inside you. When he is born, you will call him Jesus. He will be great. People will call him the Son of the powerful God who is over all. The Lord God will make him king. He will rule as his ancestor King David ruled. He will rule over the family of Jacob for all time. He will be king for all time, without end.'*

Obedience is a challenge when God asks us to do something we expect—but Mary was called to face a challenge that was the last thing she expected. Is God calling you to serve him in a way where your answer is simply, 'that can't be right'? Pray you may do his will in the expected and unexpected.

For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be  
Thy Son shall be Immanuel, by sears foretold

(Basque Carol paraphrased by *Sabine Baring-Gould*)