

Introduction to Anticipate Christmas Daily Readings

Every year, Christians around the world look forward to celebrating Jesus' birth at Christmas time. The birth of Jesus was an event that people anticipated for many hundreds of years, the prophets searching and enquiring as to the time that the Spirit of Christ was indicating the arrival of the Messiah.

At Mountain View, we take time every year to join with those who anticipated His arrival by spending roughly a month reflecting on the advent, or coming, of Jesus Christ to save His people from their sins. However, just as people before His birth anticipated His first coming, we now eagerly await His second coming.

We will observe this season starting on 29 November, culminating in our candlelight service on 24 December. Each Sunday we will look at the anticipation of Jesus' first and second comings through these four words and themes: Jesus, Christ, Lord, Saviour. Each Sunday we will light a candle and hear the readings composed for each theme word.

This year, to help keep the focus on Jesus, the staff have written devotional readings from the gospel of Luke. Each reading is taken from successive chapters. In other words, day one is from Luke 1, day two from Luke 2, and so on. And, each focuses on the person and work of Jesus.

Our hope is that you will be able to use these to keep the focus on Jesus during a season when the world tries so desperately to distract you from Him. We would love for you to use these readings in your individual quiet times as well as family devotionals to keep the main thing the main thing. We would love for you to join in reflection on Jesus in anticipation of His soon return.

[All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version]

Anticipate Christmas - 29 November

God Chose His Name

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. [Matthew 1:21]

Many songwriters and hymn writers have attempted to “unpack” the significance and wonder of the name Jesus. One of my favourites is titled simply, “There’s Something About That Name.”

Joseph and Mary did not have to ponder over what to name Mary’s child. God had selected the name for the one to be born Son of God and Son of Man. The name *Jesus* is the New Testament version of the Old Testament name *Joshua*. In both instances it references God as the one who saves.

It was clear God was doing something for the human race that was impossible by any other means: deliverance from sin. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, “the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin.” Paul reminds us good works cannot accomplish redemption. Though Jesus wears other titles—Lord, Christ, Creator, Lamb—none suggests the divine effort to redeem the race like the name Jesus.

While there is nothing mystical or mysterious about his name, there is a *majesty* inherent in the name of Jesus. Paul says. “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Jesus is the name given to the incarnate Son of God. What a tragedy so many profane his name without appreciating its significance. Sadly, many are familiar with the name but are ignorant of him whose name it is. That will all change one day for all humankind. But for us who have trusted him for eternal life, the name, Jesus, is precious and pregnant with promise. Indeed, there’s something about that name!

What does the name, Jesus mean to you?

Anticipate Christmas - 30 November

[Luke 1]

One Baby, Two Natures

And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” [Luke 1:30-33]

The announcement made to Mary that she would bear a Son holds crucial information about our Saviour, the baby whose birth we celebrate at Christmas time. That information: the nature of his nature. Jesus was more than just a human child, he was God in human form.

The truth that Jesus is God should not be a surprise to us, and it shouldn't have been a surprise to the people alive at the time of his birth. This truth was foretold throughout the Old Testament as prophets anticipated the arrival of the Messiah. Isaiah spoke of the virgin who would bear a son. His name would be Immanuel, which Matthew tells us means “God with us.” His other names include “Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

The truth that he was and is also fully human should not surprise us either. Right after the fall, God promised a rescuer who would crush the head of Satan. And that rescuer would be the seed of the woman. In other words, human.

In Jesus, then, we have one who is fully able to identify with our humanity, while also being able to save us from our sin. Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

Are you living in anticipation of our God-man Saviour's return?

Anticipate Christmas - 1 December

[Luke 2]

A Saviour of the Common Man

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." [Luke 2:8-12]

According to Luke, the birth of the Saviour of the world was announced first to shepherds, not nobility, not the wealthy, not those with status, but shepherds. Common men. That's because the birth of the man Jesus Christ was good news for ALL the people.

This is seen in the promise given to Abraham that, through his offspring (a reference to Christ), all the families of the earth would be blessed. It's seen in Jesus' associations - his disciples were fishermen and his friends, sinners. It's seen in his interactions - he was not afraid to touch the untouchable or befriend those cast out by society. Nobody was beyond his compassion. Nobody is beyond his salvation. He is the Saviour of ALL people.

Of course those with status are not excluded. After all, Luke is writing to "most excellent Theophilus". All people means all people. It means that no matter who you are, Jesus came for someone just like you. There is, however, one qualification. Jesus came to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). The good news is: that's all of us.

How will you celebrate, knowing that Jesus came for someone like you?

Anticipate Christmas - 2 December

[Luke 3]

Authority and Power

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." [Luke 3:21, 22]

We believe that Jesus is both fully God and fully man. We believe this because of what we find in the pages of the Bible. As God, he had the power and authority to do whatever he wanted. However, we learn something interesting about his relationship with the Father and Holy Spirit as we observe his life on earth.

Jesus sought to do nothing outside of the Father's will. He spoke nothing he was not authorised to speak (John 8:28). He did nothing he was not authorised to do (John 5:19). Even at the end of his life, when he could have called down legions of angels to rescue him from the cross, his attitude was, "not my will, but yours," speaking of the Father's will, of course.

Jesus also did everything empowered by the Holy Spirit. His conception was through the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). His entire ministry was empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is perhaps best seen when people accused Jesus of doing miracles by the power of Beelzebub. His response was to talk about blaspheming the Holy Spirit, indicating the true source of His miracles. Even his resurrection was by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11). Everything was empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus came to give us a relationship with the Father, under whose authority Jesus acted. As he went to heaven, he also gave us his Spirit. Jesus did everything under the authority of the Father and by the power of his Spirit. Let this season remind you that we ought also to live like this.

How will you seek to do the Father's will by the Spirit's power?

Anticipate Christmas - 3 December

[Luke 4]

Impeccable Character

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. [Luke 4:1, 2a]

This life throws all things at us. Just look around. The writers of the New Testament are all in agreement: these trials test and strengthen our faith and produce characteristics like hope, joy, peace, assurance, patience, and steadfastness. And, no matter what we are going through, we can be sure that Jesus, in his humanity, can identify with our struggles.

We can be sure that the baby, whose birth we celebrate, grew up to experience temptation like we will never experience. In the wilderness, after not eating for forty days, he resisted the temptation to turn stones into bread - even though he had the ability to do so. He resisted the temptation to worship the devil in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world. Bear in mind that those kingdoms would belong to Christ anyway, but he'd need to experience the cross first. The devil was offering a shortcut. Jesus resisted. He also resisted the temptation to make a name for himself by jumping off the temple. This too would have spared him from death and instantly catapulted him to the position of ruler of the people. Again, he did not bite. Some people can't resist a chocolate bar never mind ultimate power and authority. Jesus did.

All this gives us a high priest who is able to sympathise with our weaknesses, "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) Based on this, in times of trial we are encouraged to confidently "draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

Whatever struggle you may have this Christmas, will you "take it to the Lord in prayer"?

Anticipate Christmas - 4 December {Luke 5}

Worthy of Following

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord...." And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him. [Luke 5:8, 10]

The exchange between Peter (Simon) and Jesus in this morning's reading reveals the response of a person who has understood who Jesus truly is. Peter had loaned Jesus his boat, listened to his teaching, and done what no other fisherman would do: cast his nets into the water in the heat of the day, having just finished cleaning the nets after a long night's fish. The result of all these actions? A boat sinking catch of fish... a miracle. As a result, Peter recognised who Jesus was, he recognised his own sinfulness, and he left everything to follow Jesus.

This response is typical. When Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple, he reacted the same way. He fell down on his back, saying, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" The Lord then cleanses Isaiah, and Isaiah jumps at the opportunity to serve the Lord.

It's important to remember that Jesus was not merely a baby in a manger. He was and is Almighty God. If we were to catch a glimpse of his glory, we, like Peter and Isaiah would be undone. Thankfully, like Isaiah, the Lord is willing to cleanse all who believe in Christ for salvation. The only right response then is to follow him with everything we have.

In light of Jesus character and your cleansing, will you follow Jesus?

Anticipate Christmas - 5 December [Luke 6]

True and Total Rest

On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grain fields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?"... And he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." [Luke 6:1-2, 5]

This exchange with the Pharisees was typical for Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees and others (scribes and Sadducees) were always trying to trick Jesus into saying or doing something that would invalidate his ministry. Ultimately they were jealous of him, since a lot of their followers were abandoning them in favour of Jesus. Most of their traps were regarding the law as they promoted a kind of legalistic approach to a relationship with God. In this encounter we learn something very special about the salvation that Jesus offers.

The author of Hebrews explains it well. When God finished his creation, he rested. This later became the basis of the Sabbath referred to in the passage above. God invites people to enter his rest. The nation of Israel interpreted this as an event when Joshua led the nation into the promised land and they had rest from their enemies. However, God was pointing to a future rest and another Joshua. The other Joshua—Jesus. And the future rest—rest from our works.

Scripture is clear that no man is made right with God by works of the law. Jesus came to fulfil the law on our behalf and offer us rest from that law. If we simply have faith in the finished work of Jesus, we enter the rest of God. The Sabbath was merely a shadow, but the substance is Jesus. Through him we may rest from our works.

Have you entered the rest of God?

Anticipate Christmas - 6 December

God Chose His Mission

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
[Matthew 16:16]

Silent Night is probably one of the most familiar and favourite Christmas carols. In many churches, including ours, the song is a focal point of a candlelight carol sing. The intimacy and quietness of the music is a contrast to the magnitude of the message: "Christ, the Saviour is born." (Verse 2)

Similar to the name, *Jesus*, being the New Testament version of *Joshua*, the title *Christ* is the New Testament term for *Messiah*. Both Christ and Messiah mean "anointed one." The implications of being anointed include being set apart for a specific mission.

The Jews anticipated a Messiah whose mission would be to deliver Israel from her political enslavement. But a different dimension is revealed in the New Testament where the mission is defined as deliverance from spiritual enslavement and bondage to sin. When Jesus preached in the synagogue of Nazareth he read from Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." He told his audience he was the fulfilment of that prophecy. His good news would bring liberty to captives, sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed.

Sadly, the end of his sermon that day was not one of people responding to him in gratitude and love. Rather, they were keen on taking him away from the synagogue to throw him off a cliff!

Such a response did not affect his commitment to the task. Nor did his crucifixion suggest the end of the effort. Believers are anointed but the same Holy Spirit to carry on the mission. Until he comes again! *Maranatha!*

How are you involved in carrying on His mission?

Anticipate Christmas - 7 December

[Luke 7]

Jesus Gives the Gift of Forgiveness

And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" [Luke 7:48-49]

Throughout Luke 7 we get several glimpses into Jesus' humanity. He responded to the impassioned plea to heal a centurion's servant; and, being moved with compassion, raised a widow's son from the dead. However, during an intimate dinner at a Pharisee's house, we see Jesus' deity and humanity combine in a truly awesome display.

As everyone is reclining at the table, a woman enters the house and begins to weep on Jesus's feet, drying his feet with her hair and anointing them with precious perfume. Instead of appreciating this intimate act of humility, repentance and love, the revered leaders at the table seem deeply troubled by the laws that she was breaking right in front of their eyes. But Jesus saw the state of her heart and, instead of rebuking her like the Pharisee did, rewarded her acts of humility and repentance declaring forgiveness for her sins. A beautiful display of his love and divine ability for forgive sin.

While Christmas can often be a time of fixating on Christ in the manger, we do well to remember that Jesus came to forgive. His whole mission in coming was to provide a way for our sins to be forgiven, reconciling us to the Father. Something that only Jesus who is fully God and fully man could achieve.

If you've trusted in Christ, what better way to live out the Good News of Christmas by following Jesus' example of forgiving others? By demonstrating this forgiveness to others, we point them towards a relationship with Jesus who offers them the marvellous gifts of eternal forgiveness and eternal life.

Have I trusted in Christ for the forgiveness for my sins? If so, how can I display Christ's forgiveness to those around me this season?

Anticipate Christmas - 8 December

[Luke 8]

Jesus Gives the Gift of Light

No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. [Luke 8:16]

What's the darkest night you've ever experienced? I remember several nights out camping with my family where it was so dark you could feel it. But because we knew it was so dark, we kept a torch or headlamp close. When we turned the light on it would cut through the darkness and bring us a sense of safety and hope that we could see where we were walking and that there wasn't anything waiting to eat us!

In Jesus' parable about the lamp under the jar (Luke 8:16-18), he says how absurd it would be to light a lamp and then put it under a jar, hiding the light it gives. As believers who have the Good News of salvation, this is exactly what we do if we fail to share the light of the Gospel with others. This is the light that shines into the darkest areas of sin in our lives and highlights our need for the Saviour, the Light of the World.

Christmas presents a unique opportunity to share the Good News with those around us as we celebrate His coming into the world. After a particularly challenging and dark year, many people we encounter this season will be yearning for some good news, a light in the darkness. What could be better than showing them the Light of the World?

Pray for opportunities to share this Good News this Christmas and trust that God will use your testimony and his Gospel for his glory during this time.

Anticipate Christmas - 9 December

[Luke 9]

Jesus Gives the Gift of Grace

But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Christ of God." [Luke 9:20b]

Put yourself in Peter's shoes. He and the rest of the disciples are gathered in an intimate teaching moment where Jesus is assessing if they grasp who he really is. While the other disciples have several attempts at guessing, Peter, influenced by the Holy Spirit, declares that Jesus is **The Christ of God**. In other words, Peter understood that Jesus was the One whom the scriptures foretold would come—the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. Instead of congratulating him and telling him to go and tell the rest of the world this truth, Jesus strictly instructs him not to tell anyone else this truth (v.21). Why? Because the time wasn't right.

What a stark contrast to what we're commanded to do today! As believers we, like Peter, have met **The Saviour** and know that He is **The Christ**. But, unlike Peter, we're encouraged, *no commanded*, to spread this Good News to the ends of the world! And now is the perfect time to do this. But do we?

For many of us, Christmas is a manic time of family activities, school holidays, shopping, and preparing food. While it's very difficult to escape this inevitable rush, it would be a tragedy if it completely overshadowed the opportunity to intentionally reflect and rejoice in his marvellous act of grace. The reality of who Christ is and what he's done for us should be forefront in our minds and on our tongues this season. And it should bubble out of us into sharing it with those who we'll be spending time with in these next few weeks.

How can I slow down to allow time to intentionally reflect on Christ's act of grace during the chaos of this season?

Anticipate Christmas - 10 December

[Luke 10]

Jesus Gives the Gift of Rest

But Martha was distracted with much serving... But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her. [Luke 10:41, 42]

Whether you're dreading it or simply can't wait, many of us will share a meal with loved ones sometime during this Christmas time. These are usually very special times together, sometimes with people we haven't seen since the Christmas meal this time last year! But whatever form yours takes, you know how much effort and preparation goes into it. And that's only for family or friends!

Now put yourself in Martha's shoes who no doubt felt the pressure of having the Messiah stay at her house! Picture what was going through her mind as she ensured everything was perfect. I'm sure we can sympathise with her efforts. But rather than thank her when Jesus comes and sees her frantically preparing, he says "Whoa, slow down there Martha! Don't let all these things distract you. Leave them. Rather come and just sit and enjoy this time of me being with you in your house."

During this season where we have the time to intentionally sit at Jesus' feet and marvel not only at his birth, but also at his incredible act of dying for us, there's also the very real threat that festivities, family meals, and shopping will draw us away from the feet of our Saviour. Fight against that temptation!

In this season of distractions and busyness, will I choose the good portion of close fellowship with Christ? Don't miss this opportunity to rest at Jesus' feet!

Anticipate Christmas - 11 December

[Luke 11]

Jesus Gives the Gift of Prayer

Lord, teach us to pray. [Luke 11:1]

One day Jesus was with his disciples, and he went away to pray. When he was finished, one of the disciples came to Jesus and asked him to teach him to pray. I'm sure many of us go through seasons of not knowing how to pray, and perhaps, like this disciple, desire to know how to pray better.

Rather than giving him a magic prayer to repeat, Jesus gives him a recipe to follow when he prays. Jesus taught his disciples that when praying, they should: recognise God as Holy, ask for his daily provision, confess their sin, request deliverance from temptation and ask for the grace to forgive others.

Christmas is a special time to pray. As we remember God's gift of sending His Son to us, we can feel closer to God. But we can feel even closer to Him knowing that our position as a believer enables us to take our prayers directly into the throne room where we have the undivided attention of our Heavenly Father who did not spare even his Son for us (Rom. 8:32).

As we fight the urge to be sucked into the frenzied festivities of this season, make time to slow down and pray to our friend and Saviour Jesus Christ. Use the Lord's prayer as a way of meditating on him and thanking God for his indescribable gift of salvation to us.

Do I spend regular time with God in prayer? If not, how can I start by setting aside a time and a place every day to enter the throne room making my requests known to God?

Anticipate Christmas - 12 December

[Luke 12]

Jesus Gives the Gift of Peace

Do not be anxious about your life... [instead] be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” [Luke 12:22, 40]

This has been a strange year. What started out looking like a delicious chocolate chip cookie soon turned out to be oatmeal and raisin! For most of us, this has been the most anxious year we've ever had to endure. And it's not over! And yet, despite all the hardships and the unknown, Jesus encourages his followers not to be anxious (Luke 12:22) but instead to be ready (v.35). That seems out of touch with reality doesn't it?

Yes, to us it does. But Jesus, who is fully God and fully man has the divine ability to see from man's perspective (as well as God's), while we're totally absorbed with our own. James says that everything we experience in this life no matter how exciting, or nerve wracking, is like a mist in light of eternity (James 4:14). That's not to minimise what we go through, but rather to help us put these challenges and events in perspective.

Jesus knows the future. And as he encourages us to live readily, he does so with a glorious future event in mind: His return to take the church home to be with him forever. Because that's still to come, Jesus encourages us to live every day eagerly expecting his return.

So, as we celebrate Christ's birth, let's do so with an anticipation that He will return. This future mindset should help to replace our anxieties of this season with an eager longing and joy at the expectation of seeing our Saviour face to face and fellowshiping with the saints for eternity.

What am I anxious about this Christmas? How can I give it over to God and replace it with a joyous expectation of Christ's return?

Anticipate Christmas - 13 December

God Chose His Assignment

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." [Luke 2:10, 11]

Charles Dickens' masterpiece, *A Christmas Carol*, includes scenes of Ebenezer Scrooge being visited in the night by a series of ghosts. The result of it all is a complete change of character and priorities of the old miser.

When the angels appeared to the shepherds that first Christmas, "they were filled with great fear." Such fear was not prompted by thoughts of seeing a ghost. Rather it was the appearance of heavenly messengers whose brilliance shattered their night and disrupted their routine. The message that followed was profound. A Saviour had been born.

As Gabriel had announced to Joseph, Mary's son would save his people from their sins. But this is the first time the title, *Saviour*, is used to identify both the infant and the purpose of his coming. The Samaritans, following Jesus ministry among them said, "We have heard for ourselves and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world." Not only did Jesus come to save *his people* from their sins, he came to save *all* people from their sins. The shepherds went to the stable, sinners go to the cross to encounter the Saviour of the world.

Paul challenged Titus and believers in the churches in Crete to pursue godliness while eagerly anticipating The Blessed Hope, "the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ." We now await his return with great joy. Even so come, dear Saviour Jesus Christ.

When he comes will you be filled with fear or joy?

Anticipate Christmas - 14 December

[Luke 13]

Jesus is the Door

“Lord, will those who are saved be few?”

“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able...” [Luke 13:23-24]

According to Jesus in the Gospel of John, he is the “door” (10:1-18) and anyone who enters by him will be saved (10:9). Entrance through this door, namely Jesus Christ, is our only means for salvation. Later, in the same gospel, Jesus identifies himself also the “Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6). Only through Jesus Christ, do we have the Way to the Father, the Truth about reality, and access to new, abundant and eternal Life in the kingdom of God.

Through this door, people will come into God’s kingdom - people from east, west, north and south - every corner of the earth (v29)! John describes the scene in Revelation, “...*you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation....*” (Rev 5:9-10)...” What a Saviour! The Saviour of the world! This truly is the “*good news of great joy that will be for all the people*” - *the Saviour, who is Christ the Lord* (Luke 2:10-11). This salvation is in no one else, *no other name by which we can be saved* (Acts 4:12). Therefore, respond to his gracious invitation to be born again through faith in Jesus Christ.

For sooner or later, the master of the house will rise and shut the door (Luke 13:25). This unsettling phrase reminds us again that our time here is short - a mist, a vapour, a sigh. As Moses prayed, “*So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom*” (Ps.90:12). May we live wisely, making the most of every opportunity for the glory of God. And may we live with urgency. We do not know when the Master will return, but may we be found faithfully making disciples, when He does (Luke 12:35-48).

Consider how you can make the most of the opportunities God has given you to glorify God and proclaim this good news this week.

Anticipate Christmas - 15 December

[Luke 14]

Conditions of Discipleship

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple, [Luke 14:27]

Jesus states three conditions to becoming his disciple in verses 25-35. 1) Hate your family (v26); 2) Carry your own cross (v27); 3) Renounce everything you have (v33).

The LORD of all expects us to surrender everything to his Lordship. He is deserving of all our affections and attention in every aspect of our lives. Regarding relationships: one must “*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*” (Mark 12:30). The LORD is high above, completely and utterly separate from every other relationship. Considering our love, desire and affection for the LORD, even our closest earthly relationships do not compare. Regarding one’s life, we must give it to the LORD. This self-denial means embracing the LORD’s will over one’s own. It means complete obedience, complete dependence, and complete commitment to the LORD - at all costs. Like Jesus Christ, we are to be obedient to God’s will *to the point of death, even death on a cross* (Phil. 2:8)! “*For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it* (Mark 8:35).” This is not about a martyr complex and chasing after death, but about total freedom to follow Christ fully - no turning back. Regarding worldly possessions, the LORD, who knows the heart of man, remind us “*where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Luke 12:34).” The LORD demands all of one’s heart, so if we treasure him above all else, we joyfully forsake all else in pursuit of Christ. One cannot love the Lord above all and love money because we simply *cannot serve two masters* (Luke 16:13). We trust the LORD for provision as we pray for *our daily bread* (Luke 6:3), placing our total dependence on Him for all things.

These three conditions expected of disciples, are characteristics of followers of Christ. Like salt that loses its characteristic taste, a disciple who has lost these characteristics is worthless (Rev 3:15-17).

Consider the cost of following Christ the LORD. Is Christ worth it?

Anticipate Christmas - 16 December

[Luke 15]

Understanding the Mission

Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost.
[Luke 15:6b]

The long-awaited Messiah was given the name “Jesus,” or “Joshua.” In Hebrew, Joshua, meaning “Yahweh saves,” was a popular name among Hebrew boys. When the angel spoke to Joseph, however the angel indicated Mary’s son’s name was specific and significant: “*he will save his people from their sins.*” (Matt 1:21).

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” (Luke 15:1-2) Jesus used parables help the Pharisees and scribes (and us) to understand his ways and his special attention and love for the lost.

He likens his care and concern to that of a shepherd who discovered one of his sheep is lost. As expected, the shepherd goes searching for the one lost sheep. When it is eventually found, he calls family and friends to celebrate the good news! Incredibly, the Saviour Jesus reveals that heaven rejoices in a similar way when just one sinner repents! Jesus has come to save that which was lost.

Next, he compares his pursuit of the lost to a woman who sweeps and turns her house inside out until she finds her lost money. Upon its discovery, she calls for her family and friends to join her in celebrating the good news the lost is now found. Again, Jesus tells us of the joy of angels in heaven over the repentant sinner.

Jesus saves and takes great joy and pleasure in recovering the lost. The author of Hebrews instructs us to “*look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross...*” (Heb. 12:2). It is this name, *Jesus*, and no other name by which we can be saved (Acts 4:12).

Consider Hebrews 12:2 and what Christ endured in order that you might be saved from God’s wrath for your sins against him. Spend time responding to Him in thankfulness in light of this truth.

Anticipate Christmas - 17 December [Luke 16]

God, Money, Heaven, Hell

No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” [Luke 16:13]

Knowing the human heart, Jesus teaches extensively about money and managing it faithfully for the kingdom of God. Note: Jesus did not say you SHOULD NOT serve God and money, but you CANNOT.

His teaching on money in this section of Luke’s Gospel includes a difficult parable. (The Rich Man and Lazarus) Beginning in verse 19, Jesus’ audience, including the Pharisees who loved money (v14), would have heard the description of the rich man and would have concluded he was the recipient of God’s favour evidenced by his riches. In great contrast, listeners are next introduced to the poor man, covered in sores, begging for scraps obviously the wicked sinner in the tale. But in a great reversal, it is poor Lazarus that is carried to heaven and the rich man ends up in hell!

This parable teaches us five realities about hell: 1) The punishment is immediate; 2) The punishment consists of torment, or intense and excruciating suffering; 3) The punishment is conscious and the rich man is perfectly aware of his anguish; 4) The punishment is deserved and just.

While this is bad news for the sinner, there is good news. Christ, the Messiah—written about in the law of Moses, the prophets, and psalms and on every page of Scripture—is the crucified and resurrected Saviour who, through his shed blood, offers forgiveness of sin and appeals to the people of all nations to repent and be saved. Hell need not be one’s destiny; heaven can be one’s hope and home.

Consider these realities of hell and your own standing before a Holy, Righteous God. Then consider the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Have you accepted and believed the gospel of Jesus Christ? How about your loved ones? Pray for those who have not trusted the gospel for salvation.

Anticipate Christmas - 18 December

[Luke 17]

True Faith is Thankful

And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" [Luke 17:5]

How many of us have prayed the same prayer? Jesus' reply is great encouragement to those of little faith. Even faith the size of a mustard seed could see mighty deeds accomplished for the glory of God (v 6). The point is not the size or quality of one's faith, but rather in whom it is placed, namely the LORD.

Jesus healed ten lepers. One expressed his thanks. So significant is this spirit of gratitude and praise that Christ says to him, "*Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well*" (v19). The literal translation of the Greek phrase is, "your faith has saved you." Jesus' words imply the healing for this single leper went beyond the physical. His faith was demonstrated in part by his thankfulness. As we grow in our understanding and knowledge of our calling, we should similarly overflow with thankfulness.

Sadly, as was the case with the Pharisees, so many people demand "signs" or proofs according to a standard of their choosing before trusting Christ. In verses 20-21, Jesus points out that they were already blinded and the kingdom of God they so longed to see was right in front of their eyes. "*Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you*" (v. 21). Jesus Christ is Immanuel, God with us. Even today, we can rejoice with thankfulness as he has promised to be with us still, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Rejoice today if you have faith, not in its quality, but in its object—the Christ, the anointed one of God, the chosen Messiah, the Saviour of the world! We are unworthy, we were dead in our transgressions and sins, we were enemies. But while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5.8). That's how God showed us his love.

Consider your most recent times of prayer. How much gratitude was expressed in thanksgiving in those prayers? Thank the LORD for your faith he has granted you. Thank him for his presence now.

Anticipate Christmas - 19 December [Luke 18]

Not what we do but what he has done!

Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved" But he said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God" [Luke 18:26, 27]

The somewhat desperate question from the disciples comes after Jesus' conversation with one called "a ruler" He was seeking an answer to how he could inherit eternal life. His question is asked in a context of Jesus condemning those who trust in themselves (vs. 9-14) and using a child says "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (v. 17)

In response to the man's question, Jesus reminded him of the commandments, mentioning only those instructing humans how to relate to each other. He does not mention the first four all of which have to do with how men relate to God. Excitedly, the man lets Jesus know how earnestly he has followed all of these laws. But Jesus knew the heart of this man. He revealed which laws he had broken without even speaking them. *"One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me (v22)."* The man left with a heavy heart because he was very rich and, it seems clear, very much in love with his riches. While the man seemed to be loving others by obeying some of the commands, he was breaking the first and greatest commandment: 1) Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And 2) Love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:35-40). The man was trusting in himself (see v. 9) and lacked the childlikeness Jesus commended (v. 17) Both disqualified the man from inheriting the kingdom.

We understand that salvation is by grace, a gift of God. Receiving eternal life is the result of trusting in Christ rather than oneself or what one possesses.

Ask the Spirit of God to search your heart and reveal where idols may lie. Confess that sin receive his forgiveness. Repent and submit to the conviction of the Spirit, then change, allowing him to transform you into the image of the Son.

Anticipate Christmas - 20 December

God Affirms his Identity

Jesus came and stood among them and said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" [John 20:27, 28]

When I was in the Navy, I was expected to address every officer as "sir." I had been taught long before that to use the term as a title of respect for older men, men in places of authority and those worthy of respect. Similarly, the term *Lord* was used in New Testament times as a title of respect. However, it was also a term used to designate deity. As the gospel spread through the Roman empire, conflict arose among Romans who were expected to say, "Caesar is Lord" and Christians who would only affirm "Christ is Lord." The term was more than evidence of respect. It served to evidence one recognised as God.

The name, *Jesus*, describes Jesus' humanity as well as his purpose: to redeem the human family. The title, *Lord*, declares his identity as God. The angels announced the birth of a Saviour who is Christ the Lord; Peter bowed at Jesus feet on his fishing boat that day saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Thomas identified Jesus as his "Lord" and his "God." The post-resurrection accounts of Jesus' appearances nearly always refer to their "seeing the Lord." Paul, being smitten with a bright light from heaven as he made his way to Damascus submitted to the Christ with his words, "What shall I do, Lord?"

In Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul made it clear that to be saved one must acknowledge Jesus Christ is God and believe he died and rose again. By such acknowledgement one becomes a part of the forever family. One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. It won't just be acknowledgement of respect. It will be a statement of recognition that Jesus Christ is God. Even so come Lord Jesus.

What is your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ?

Anticipate Christmas - 21 December

[Luke 19]

Jesus, the Son of Man

The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. [Luke 19:10]

The story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus is likely as familiar as the Christmas story itself. Even Grade R tots learn the song about the "wee little man." Like the detailed account of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the story of Zacchaeus is only found in Luke's gospel.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he would be crucified in just a matter of days. On his way, he stopped by Jericho. Crowds surrounded him there, forcing Zacchaeus to climb a tree in order to see the popular rabbi. Probably no one is more surprised than he when Jesus stops at the foot of the tree and asks Zacchaeus to come down from his perch. Even more surprising, no doubt, is Jesus inviting himself to Zacchaeus' home for the day. It was a custom for homeowners to take strangers in, however, Zacchaeus' career was not one the Jews looked upon with any kind of respect. Rather they despised tax collectors, numbering them among drunks and prostitutes.

But Jesus' words at the end of the story are riveting. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Zacchaeus was eager to see Jesus; Jesus sought out Zacchaeus in the tree. Zacchaeus would have been satisfied just to have seen Jesus; Jesus was only satisfied with time in Zacchaeus' home.

Jesus came to call Zacchaeus out of his hiding place desiring to have fellowship with him. How like the first couple in Eden. The Lord called them out their hiding place, confronted their sin and reconciled them to himself. Zacchaeus came to realise Jesus was more than just a celebrity. He was the Saviour come to seek and save. Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' presence was not a *display* of his wealth, rather a willingness to give it all away. When Jesus seeks and saves the lost, lives and priorities change.

Do you remember when Jesus found you and called him to himself?

Anticipate Christmas - 22 December

[Luke 20]

Jesus, the Son of David

How can they say that the Christ is David's son?...David thus calls him Lord, so how his he his son? [Luke 20:41-44]

When I was a kid, I loved riddles. Most of them were pretty silly but many were posers that made you think. Jesus conversation with the religious leaders near the end of his early ministry includes what might be considered a riddle. No doubt his hearers were scratching their heads as they tried to sort out the answer. The point of the Jesus' "riddle" was to establish two truths. First, Jesus is the son of David, that is born of David's line. The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke verify that. Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would bear a son was worded, "And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David." Jesus was born in Bethlehem, "the city of David" God's covenant with David establishing his dynasty ultimately looked forward to the birth of Messiah. He would be the last and the greatest in the Davidic line. Jesus' humanity identified him as a Jew of the tribe of Judah of the house of David.

But Jesus makes clear David acknowledged his offspring would be more than simply another in the kingly order. He would, in addition to being the son of David, be the son of God. Whether he fully comprehended it or not, Jesus would be the God-man born to take away the sins of the world (Psalm 16) but would also one day be king of the world. The truth of Jesus' deity continually escaped his own people's understanding. They rejected him as Messiah, accused him of blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of God and ultimately crucified him for daring to identify himself as King of the Jews.

John says, "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

Do you know him or is his identity a riddle to you?

Anticipate Christmas - 23 December [Luke 21]

Jesus, the King of Kings

And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. [Luke 21:27]

Have you ever been in the presence of the president of our country, or even the premier of one of the provinces? Anyone who has ever been in the presence of someone of such stature relates a sense of awe and privilege. Not many countries have kings or queens these days, but political officials cast big shadows, their position and presence deemed worthy of respect.

Can you imagine the reaction of people who will witness the arrival of King Jesus? Both testaments indicate many of his own people will be stricken with guilt and will mourn their ill treatment of Jesus when he walked among them. Others will celebrate the long awaited Messiah-king who will arrive to rule the nations with a rod of iron.

Both testaments also describe the effects of his earthly reign. The desert will blossom like the crocus or the lily; animals will eat straw rather than one another; children will play with scorpions and snakes; the land will be productive and will support a growing and enduring population and peace will prevail throughout the earth. In short, the world system, now in the arms of the wicked one (1 John 5:19) will be under the authority of the righteous one. The conditions and atmosphere of the entire earth will be reminiscent of the Garden of Eden.

Jesus relates to believers as part of the forever family. He is not the king of the church; we are not his subjects. He is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. However, he is the Head of the Church and is worthy of our submission, love and respect. When he reigns as King of the Earth, we will live and reign with him for 1,000 years. What a future; what a promise; what a hope!

How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?

Anticipate Christmas - 24 December [Luke 22]

Jesus, the Servant of All

But I am among you as one who serves. [Luke 22:27]

It seems to be a part of human nature to aspire to greatness. Young people today are infatuated with movie stars, musicians, rock stars and others who seem to have achieved so much even at a relatively young age. Others anticipate being successful in the realm of politics, industry or commerce so as to command headlines and leave a mark on their world. Luke records one of many disputes among the disciples that resemble today's ambitions. They each aspired to be someone great in the kingdom. It's probable these men, with the possible exception of Peter, were in their late teens or early twenties. The ambitions of youth were, no doubt, intensified by their proximity to Jesus whom they rightly understood to be the Messiah-King. And, not for the first time, Jesus gently rebukes them for allowing the cultural norm to cloud their thinking about what being his disciples fully meant. It is perhaps in the midst of this discussion Jesus washed their feet to help them more fully understand the meaning of his gentle rebuke.

A lot is said about servant-leadership today. Some assume it means a hesitation to have an opinion or exert influence; or having an apologetic attitude for being in the position. However, Jesus' life and ministry demonstrated he clearly knew who he was and what the mission was. The substance of it all is *attitude*. Is ambition or desire to lead fuelled by self-centredness or thirst for power. Or is the opportunity to be a leader seen as a means of helping those we lead become more mature in their faith; more secure in their own self-awareness; more interested in the progress of one's followers than the promotion of one's own competence?

A wise man once said that whether or not we are truly servants is revealed in the way we react when we are treated like one!

Do you seek to serve or be served; to be known or to make Him known?

Anticipate Christmas - 25 December

[Luke 23]

Jesus, Forgiver of Sins

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." [Luke 23:34]

Are there many things that are much harder than forgiving someone who has wronged us? Actions or words of others that wound the heart become etched in our minds with little hope of ever forgetting. Some even declare, "I can't ever forgive that person." Yet are there many things that are more Christlike than to be a forgiving person? The apostle Paul challenges us to forgive as we have been forgiven. (Col. 3:13).

Jesus taught much about forgiveness during his earthly ministry, however, he demonstrated the extent of what that means while being nailed to a cross. He uttered the words noted above. Many have asked for whom did Jesus ask the Father's forgiveness? From the verses immediately preceding his words were directed at the two thieves crucified beside him. Beyond that, however, the forgiveness seems to embrace the Jews. Jesus sought the Father's forgiveness for those who had rejected him, mocked him, ridiculed him and campaigned for him to be crucified. His prayer seems also to extend to the Romans who nailed him to the cross then gambled for his belongings. But more, Jesus' prayer for forgiveness has echoed down the corridors of time to make it possible for human persons to be reconciled to God.

As I recently read through the account of Jesus trials and crucifixion I was made aware he suffered physically (the cross), mentally (the anguish of his heart as he prayed in Gethsemane), emotionally (he was abandoned by his disciples), socially (he was rejected by his own) and spiritually (the Father turned his back on Jesus as he bought our forgiveness). He not only *prayed* for our forgiveness; he *paid* for our forgiveness. It seem to me we who have been forgiven us so much should find it in our hearts to be generous in our willingness to forgive others. We've never been so cruelly treated as was Jesus, the Master Forgiver!

Who are you finding it hard to forgive? What would Jesus do?

Anticipate Christmas - 26 December [Luke 24]

Jesus, the Risen Christ

And said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,..." [Luke 24:46]

Nothing sets Christianity apart from other religions than does the reality of the risen Christ. All of the great icons of the world's cults, isms and religions are dead; their tombs are shrines for honour and worship. But the tomb in which Jesus was placed after his death is empty, and he is alive forevermore.

It was the living Christ who walked with the two on the road to Emmaeus, discussing the events of recent days as well as passages from the Scriptures. It was the resurrected Jesus who appeared to his disciples in the upper room. Like with the two on the road, Jesus ate a meal with them and explained the Scriptures to them. His various appearances affirmed he had bodily risen from the grave. He was no ghost. He stood among them "having flesh and bone." He taught them as had been his practice for over three years. And now, as he prepared to return to heaven, he prepared them to carry on the work he had begun.

The death, burial, resurrection and appearances of Christ are the indispensable ingredients of the gospel. If Jesus was not resurrected, the price of sin was not fully paid. If Jesus was not resurrected, our faith is empty and our hope is a delusion. If Jesus was not raised from the dead we are, as Paul puts it, "of all men most miserable."

Again, in contrast with other religions, our faith and hope do not reside in what we do but what he has *done*. We are not dependent on our *works* but on His *work*. We are not on a treadmill of a meaningless existence unsure of what the future holds. Our faith is in the living Saviour who is now seated at the Father's right hand. One day he will return. We will see him as he is; we will have a body like his glorified body. "And so shall we ever be with the Lord."

Does the risen Christ live in you today?