



SCIAF

Uniting for a just world
Caritas Scotland



**“For a Child
has been born
for us...”**

Isaiah 9:6



Sofia,
Malawi



Reflections for the 4th Week of Advent

Reflections by Father David Stewart SJ

Monday 18th December

Wondering... dreaming... awakening...



Read Jer. 23:5-8, Mt. 1:18-24

The prophet Jeremiah voices desires that lie deep, even hidden, within each of us – desires for home and integrity, honesty and confidence. Are these your Advent desires, this year?

Matthew's Gospel gives an account of the birth of Jesus, God's fullest response to those longings of the ages. God's answer was much more than we dared hope for – no less than God's own being, now with us, Emmanuel.

St. Joseph, the honourable and trusting man, came to know inwardly what this birth would mean. He found strength in his soul, in his dreams, to trust, despite his understandable hesitation. This Advent, when we dream and then awaken, what might we see anew?

God of all our deepest longings, you place all our good desires in our hearts through your Holy Spirit. Like Joseph, may we have the strength and courage to do what isn't easy. With all the friends of SCIAF, we pray to see this Advent that our best desires are what you want too, for our world. Amen.

Tuesday 19th December

Unlikely blessings... visions of angels



Read Judges 13:2-7, 24-25; Luke 1:5-25

Luke loves announcements. Today, we can enjoy two, because there's one in the First Reading as well. We read of how an unnamed 'man of God' announced the forthcoming birth of Samson, then Luke's Gospel brings us the similar story of the elderly Zechariah and Elizabeth, as they hear the unlikely news that they will have a son. This time, the Angel identifies himself – "I am Gabriel, who stands in God's presence."

Zechariah was not only incredulous, but terrified. Despite his faithful years of priestly service, he let his fears overcome him. We would sympathise with this understandable response, as what was foretold went against all the evidence. Thus, he lost the power of speech, a serious problem for a leader of worship in the sanctuary.

But what the angel announced did come to pass; Zechariah's speech would be restored, his son born, and God's salvific plan proclaimed. What good news does God send us this Advent? How do we speak it?

Gracious God, come to us again in these moments of darkness for our world, when we sometimes feel we have no power of speech. Place your word in our hearts and on our lips so that, with your grace, we can speak it to our world in your Holy Name. Amen.

Community in Malawi walking along a floodwater protection barrier, repaired through SCIAF funding



Wednesday 20th December
**Signs and amazing
announcements**



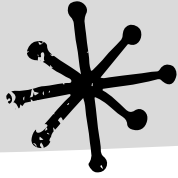
Read Isaiah 7:1-14; Luke 1:26-38

"She was deeply disturbed by these words..."
The most beloved of the Annunciations in the Bible is from Luke, today's Advent Gospel. Gabriel, whose announcement to Zechariah of the birth of John, prefigured this moment, was sent again to bring even more astonishing news to this young woman, Mary. This moment, this exchange, has always moved people deeply and many of humanity's greatest artists, such as Fra Angelico (1445), have honoured the moment.

We need to take care not to avoid Mary's objections to what she heard from the Angel. St. Luke wants us to see her as the best of the chosen people, elected for this unique role. She was "deeply disturbed" and did not hesitate to voice a reasonable objection! Her holiness led her to accept; filled with grace, for all time onwards she kept the word of God that she had heard.

God of compassion for the poor, you know that we sometimes find it too much to accept what you ask of us. With Mary's intercession, and her example, we pray to hear the word of God and keep it, as she does to this day. Amen.

Thursday 21st December
A mission journey



Read Song of Songs 2:8-14; Luke 1:39-45

Two women of different generations meet in a beautiful moment of empathy and delight. Mary went as soon as she could to Zechariah and Elizabeth's home in the hills, not only to share the good news of the angel's message but also bearing the unborn Son of God within her.

It is unlikely that Elizabeth would have had prior knowledge of Mary's pregnancy. But she immediately discerned the moment's immense significance, as did the child she was bearing herself. Mary, in the Visitation, was the first to bring Jesus to another human person and thus is the first missionary disciple! Elizabeth and her unborn son are the first to receive him and they do so with joy, accepting and rejoicing.

Elizabeth's joyous greeting was another annunciation. In Advent, we too want to hear an annunciation. Who will say these words to us? Who might be bringing Jesus to us this year?

Gracious God, hear the prayers of your people who long to hear and to recognise your announcements as our own. May you people, our church, and all who serve with SCIAF and our partners, bring joy and peace to the world, this Advent and always. Amen.



Friday 22nd December

An answer to a prayer



Read 1 Sam. 1:24–28; Luke 1:46–56

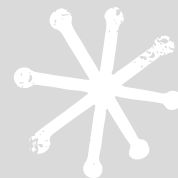
Mary was now filled with the Spirit of God in yet another instance of wonder and surprise for us. Still staying with Elizabeth, who had quickly understood all that was happening, she spoke out what she had come to see was the significance of this child she was carrying. We know this as her Magnificat.

This birth will turn human history upside-down. We can't explain away the reversals that Mary now foresees, nor can we deny that humanity continues to resist his mercy. With SCIAF, we can pray that we will welcome the birth of this child, mindful of the mercy and promises of God, which reach from age to age.

God of justice for the poor, we, the friends of SCIAF, want to work for that justice and mercy that Mary proclaimed. We trust that your mercy is from age to age and we ask to know it now, in our time, so that the God-given human dignity of all will be respected and glorified. We ask this prayer with the intercession of Mary, the Mother of Jesus and our mother. Amen.

Saturday 23rd December

They were all astonished



Read Mal. 3:1–4, 23–24; Luke 1:57–66

A birth, a beginning and a faculty restored – Elizabeth gives birth to the child who is to be called John. His elderly father, who had been unable to accept the angel's announcement of this birth, and thus had lost his speech, had now come to believe. "His name is John", he wrote on the tablet, then regained his power of speech.

Zechariah used this restored power solely to praise God. Those present were awe-struck and talked of little else. Something deep in each of them knew that this was God's new work for the world.

Might you be filled with awe, in our days, as you make your Advent prayer this year? With what astonished words, by what merciful actions, are you now able to praise God?

You give us speech, good God, and the gift of discernment for your greater glory and for the salvation of the world from all selfishness and pride. Be with us now, as the Nativity draws near, and guide us to use your many good gifts for the common good. May we see & hear, in the poor majority of our world, your call to holy service. Amen.



Sunday 24th December

Even as he proclaimed



Read 2 Sam. 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16; Luke 1:67-79

For much of 2023, the people of God have engaged in the Synodal process, discussing and discerning God's call to the church in the world in this new, still-young century. We, the people of God, have done so against a background of unprecedented strife among peoples and for our common home. The world is on fire with flames and rage. Will our words be heard through this chaos?

Zechariah, having doubted that any words of God could be heard, now sees in this little child, John, the "tender mercy" of God that will "guide our feet into the way of peace". Empowered in the good Spirit, he announces John's ministry of preparation for Jesus.

It's not hard to name people and places who need that peace in our day: the land of the births of Jesus and John, in particular. Pray this prayer of Zechariah for them and for all the suffering people who turn to SCIAF each day.

Gracious God, Father of mercies, I and my community pray this Advent Sunday and Christmas Eve, that what Zechariah saw in his prophecy, the way of the Lord that John prepared, may touch human history anew in our day. Touch the hearts of all who have the power to stop the suffering and to bring peace to the earth! - Amen.

*A special thank you
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Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund

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**Christmas
Appeal 2023**

