JUST CHURCH
A project of Church Action on Poverty

Bible study

good news to the oppressed

This Bible study can be used any time, but is particularly suitable for Advent.

1 - pray

- Thank God for His word and for our freedom to read it.
- Ask that God will speak to you anew through this passage and grant you wisdom as you read and reflect.
- Ask for renewed curiosity and wonder to grasp this familiar story with a fresh outlook.
- Ask for opportunities to respond and courage to act.

2 - read: Luke 1: 46-55

46 And Mary[a] said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

3 - reflect

- As Christians this is a familiar passage. That can make it difficult for us to properly hear its radicalness. Try reading it as if for the first time. What stands out for you? What words and images strike you?
- Mary rejoices that God will challenge injustice and inequality, yet our society remains unequal. What can we do to be God's change happening?
- This passage has been seen as a charter for revolution. Should Christians be involved in revolutionary acts?
- In response to this passage, artist Ben Wildflower created this image (*right*). How does this depiction of Mary strike you? You can read Ben's explanation at **emptyhandsexpectantheart.wordpress.com/2016/05/09/a-note-on-the-art**
- This is the longest piece of speech by a woman in the New Testament. Does that surprise you? What's your experience of voicelessness in church or in society?
- Mary is often referred to as meek and mild yet appears here as a woman of boldness and courage. When have you noticed language being used to neutralise a message?



4 - think

Found only in the Gospel of Luke, the Magnificat is part of a number of "canticles" or hymns surrounding the infancy narratives. Writing for a predominantly Gentile audience, Luke was communicating key messages about the person of Jesus and the priorities of his mission and ministry.

For a Jewish audience, Mary's Magnificat would have been familiar, echoing themes found in the Song of Hannah (1 Sam: 2) and throughout Jewish scripture. This would be a reminder of the special place in God's heart for the *anawin*, the little ones, the poor and the powerless in society, understanding that a just society and right relationship with the *anawin* was proof of their faithfulness to God. How new and revolutionary might such a message be for Luke's Gentile audience?

By placing this passage so prominently, Luke makes clear that God's priority for the poor is not an optional extra, or only for the Jewish nation, but central to being a follower of Jesus. This would have been significant to those who felt unjustly treated and unheard, reminding them that God knew their stories and included all in the restoration of justice.

In hearing the voice of Mary, Luke also makes clear who God will work with. At a time when women would have been silent, Luke gives us the voices of two: one young, unmarried and poor (in the original translation a "*doulé*" or slave-girl), the other older, possibly menopausal, barren. Even more radical, Mary is pregnant although unmarried, which would have risked rejection by family and retribution by the wider community. Instead of being shamed and silenced however, Mary proudly tells her story, becoming both prophet and preacher and one of the first to declare the Good News of Jesus.

Mary's Magnificat would have been seen as revolutionary by its audience, a promise of a world turned upside down and reset by God. Through the centuries the Magnificat has continued to be radical, inspiring marginalised people around the world to respond to its message and at times leading to its banning from public use by authorities afraid of its power.

5 - listen

If Luke's Magnificat was radical when first written, how does it challenge us today as it reminds us of God's desire for right relationships at the heart of a just society? In hearing Mary's voice from the margins, how might it prompt us to listen to those who are voiceless now?

Hearing voices from the margins can be uncomfortable, saying things we don't want to hear or challenging how we do things. Not hearing them, however, or speaking for them, has consequences. In his book *Poverty Safari* Darren McGarvey observes "the conversation about poverty is usually dominated by people with little direct experience of being poor... this deficit, between those who tend to lead the conversation, and those who experience the issue, [...] not only impedes progress, but also leads to people in poverty feeling misrepresented or excluded."

If we open ourselves to really hearing people, what difference does it make? Church Action on Poverty has taken part in or supported a number of Poverty Truth Commissions, with the motto "Nothing about us without us is for us." Commissions bring together people with direct experience of poverty and civic and business leaders, as commissioners to share experiences and listen to each other, recognising the wisdom and expertise each brings.

This could be a disconcerting experience. One council director spoke of her devastation as she realised the council was identified as a cause of poverty - but it could also be empowering. One participant told of their astonishment as "senior people we wanted to listen to us *did* listen to us!"

Many grassroots commissioners experienced an increase in confidence and self-belief as their voices were heard and responded to, while public commissioners felt humbled by the process and better able to understand the communities they served, going on to make changes to services that better reflected need.

Properly listening to people affected by poverty and injustice can be uncomfortable, potentially challenging assumptions and - perhaps most dangerously - heart,s as we enter into relationship with others. As Luke reminds us however, it's only when we are in right relationship that we create a truly just society.



6 - respond

- How well does *your* church community listen to people who don't normally get heard? What can your church do to ensure all voices are included and what difference might it make?
- Are there grassroots groups in your area, trying to be heard? Look at their communication channels, and see what they are saying and calling for. Can you help amplify their voices.
- Take a collection for Church Action on Poverty. Right now, we're supporting people in poverty to speak up and be heard in 115 neighbourhoods around the UK.
- Explore *Dreams & Realities*, our touring art exhibition from 2025. It has ten portraits by Stephen Martin (*right*) and their stories, sharing their everyday realities, and the dreams they would pursue if they were not held back by poverty. Visit **church-poverty.org.uk/sunday/paintings**
- Speak to your church leader about becoming a Just Church, to celebrate and share what you're already doing, and to explore next steps. Full details are at **just-church.org.uk**



7 - end in prayer

Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

Where advertisers manipulate our desires
Where we want more than enough
And fail to notice the needs of others
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

Where lies cover the truth
And individuals and nations act out of greed
Trampling on the oppressed
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

In our homes and families
Teach us to forgive and to heal
May love surround us and kindness flourish
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

In our church
Give us courage to stand up for what is right to be truth-speakers and to work for justice among us
This Advent, make us ready to receive you.
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

Give us courage to build the kingdom
To remain watchful and generous-hearted
And to be alert to the work of your Spirit in our midst
Disturbing our complacency challenging the status quo and teaching us how to walk with you and live for you.
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

Listening God,
We live in a world of talking without listening,
So keen to be right
We don't notice what's wrong.
Failing to hear the stories and the silence of our neighbours,
Keen to fix but not to understand.
Still our clamouring hearts and heads,
Open our ears to the voices that cry out for justice,
Open our hearts to their joys and hopes, grief and anguish
And open our minds to creative possibilities,
Working together
To build a society, just and fair for all.
We ask this in your name.
Amen

This resource is based largely on a study prepared by Miriam McHardy for the *Dignity, Agency, Power* anthology in 2022.

We have further worship materials, reflections and resources to help your church become a more just church.
Use the QR code here, or visit

just-church.org.uk