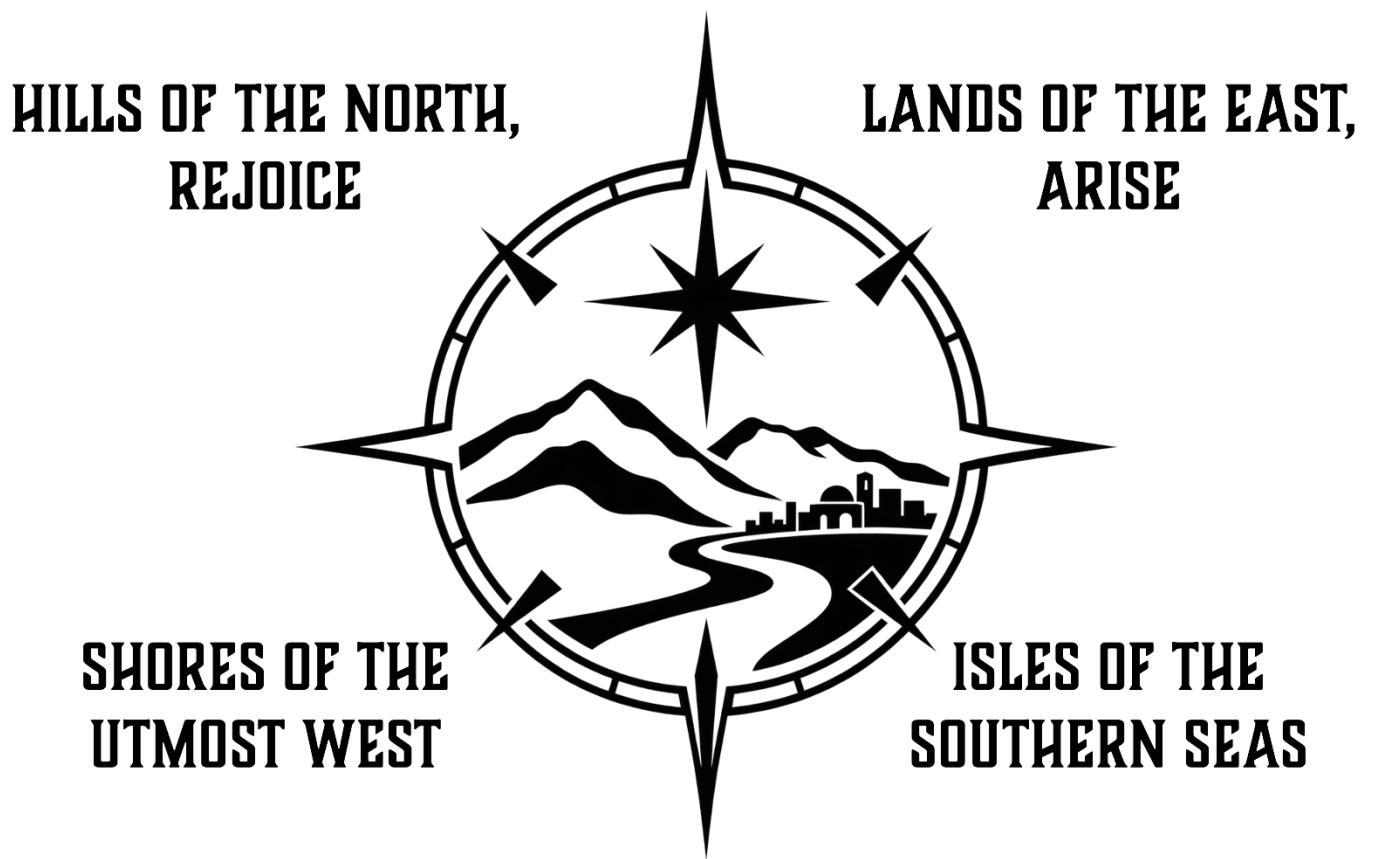




Advent and Christmas 2026

The Journey Home

St Barnabas | Christ Church | St Wulstans

The Journey Home takes us from Advent Sunday to the day before Christmas Eve. We follow Luke's introduction to the Christmas story, before spending the last few days before Christmas with the Word that John's Gospel declares to us. We will also travel from north to south, east to west, guided by the hymn *Hills of the North, Rejoice*. Along the way, we explore the ancient Advent questions of mortality, judgement, separation and eternal life, before discovering at Christmas that once again God has come to make his home among us, inviting us once again to find our home in him.

Sunday 29th November – Thursday 3rd December

Hills of the North, rejoice, river and mountain-spring, hark to the advent voice; valley and lowland, sing. Christ comes in righteousness and love, he brings salvation from above.

Hopeful Confusion | Luke 1:5–25

The hymn calls the hills and valleys to rejoice, announcing that the long-awaited homecoming is near. In Luke's Gospel, however, the journey begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, an elderly couple whose faithful lives have been marked by disappointment. They are growing old, and the future they once imagined seems to have passed them by. When Gabriel announces that they will have a son, Zechariah struggles to believe the promise and loses his voice. The hills are summoned to sing, while the priest remains silent. Yet Elizabeth's unexpected pregnancy becomes the first sign that God is opening a way forward. The journey home begins in hopeful confusion, confronting the limits of human life while discovering that even our endings need not be the end of God's promises.

SUNDAY 29TH NOVEMBER

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.



Why does Luke begin his Christmas story like this?

MONDAY 30TH NOVEMBER

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.



Why might Zechariah be frightened by an answer to his prayers?

TUESDAY 1ST DECEMBER

But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’



How does this connect with the hills of the north in our hymn verse?

WEDNESDAY 2ND DECEMBER

Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.’ The angel replied, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.



What is your own experience of silence and of being silenced?

THURSDAY 3RD DECEMBER

When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'



Why does Luke give Elizabeth the final word?

Friday 4th December – Tuesday 8th December

**Isles of the
Southern seas,
sing to the
listening earth,
carry on every
breeze hope of
a world's new
birth: In Christ
shall all be
made anew, his
word is sure,
his promise
true.**

Peaceful Disruption | Luke 1:26–38

The hymn calls the distant islands to join the Advent celebration, reaching across the seas that separate them from the wider world. In Luke's Gospel, Gabriel travels to Nazareth, where Mary discovers that her familiar life is about to change. His announcement unsettles her, calling into question everything she might have expected of her future. She must weigh what she has heard, recognise the demands of God's calling and decide how she will respond. Her answer, 'Let it be with me according to your word', becomes a moment of reckoning in which her life is opened to God's purposes. The journey home continues through peaceful disruption, as the encounter with God challenges familiar assumptions and invites a different way of living.

FRIDAY 4TH DECEMBER

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.



Why does Luke tell us so little about Mary before Gabriel arrives?

SATURDAY 5TH DECEMBER

Gabriel came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.'



What is so fearsome about being God's favourite?

SUNDAY 6TH DECEMBER

'And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'



How does this announcement echo our hymn verse about the isles of the southern seas?

MONDAY 7TH DECEMBER

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'



How is Mary's experience connected with all that was happening for Zechariah and Elizabeth in the story?

TUESDAY 8TH DECEMBER

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.



Why does Luke give Mary the final word?

Wednesday 9th December – Sunday 13th December

**Lands of the
East, arise,
he is your
brightest morn,
greet him with
joyous eyes,
praise shall his
path adorn:
Your seers have
longed to know
their Lord;
to you he
comes, the
final word.**

Joyful Warnings | Luke 1:39–56

The hymn calls the eastern lands to arise and welcome their coming deliverer. In Luke's Gospel, Mary rises and journeys into the hill country, where Elizabeth welcomes her with joy. Their meeting brings together two women whose lives have been transformed by God's promises. Yet Mary's Magnificat announces that the coming kingdom will overturn the familiar order: the powerful brought low, the hungry filled and the rich sent away empty. Behind the rejoicing lies a warning about the possibility of becoming so attached to wealth, status and power that we lose our way altogether. The journey home continues through joyful warnings, reminding us that some roads lead away from the life God intends, and that the invitation to return involves a transformation of the world and of ourselves.



*Pour your grace into our hearts,
O Lord, that we who have known the
incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ,
announced by an angel to the
Virgin Mary, may by his cross and
passion be brought to the glory
of his resurrection; Amen.*

WEDNESDAY 9TH DECEMBER

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'



How does Elizabeth and her baby's exuberant welcome challenge the shame Mary may have faced at home?

THURSDAY 10TH DECEMBER

'And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'



How does Elizabeth live the words of the lands of the east verse?

FRIDAY 11TH DECEMBER

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.'



Look at the very personal language Mary uses.

SATURDAY 12TH DECEMBER

'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.'



Look at how Mary's vision expands outwards.

SUNDAY 13TH DECEMBER

'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.' And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.



Why does Mary place her story in the long history of her people?

Monday 14th December – Friday 18th December

**Shores of the
utmost West,
lands of the
setting sun,
welcome the
heavenly guest
in whom the
dawn has come:
He brings a
never-ending
light who
triumphed o'er
our darkest
night.**

Faithful Uncertainty | Luke 1:57–80

The hymn turns towards the western shores, where the setting sun gives way to the promise of everlasting light. In Luke's Gospel, John's birth fulfils God's promise to Elizabeth and Zechariah, but his name challenges the expectations of those around him. When Zechariah recovers his voice, he prophesies that 'the dawn from on high will break upon us', bringing light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, and guiding their feet into the way of peace. His vision reaches beyond the immediate circumstances of John's birth towards the hope of a life no longer overshadowed by fear or death. The journey home continues through faithful uncertainty, trusting that God's promises lead towards a lasting home in his presence, even when that destination remains beyond the horizon.

MONDAY 14TH DECEMBER

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

How is Elizabeth echoing the shores of the utmost west verse?





*God for whom we watch and wait,
you sent John the Baptist to prepare
the way of your Son:
give us courage to speak the truth,
to hunger for justice,
and to suffer for the cause of right,
with Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

TUESDAY 15TH DECEMBER

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.



What has changed in Zechariah during his months of silence?

WEDNESDAY 16TH DECEMBER

Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.'



Notice how Zechariah answers their questions.



THURSDAY 17TH DECEMBER | O SAPIENTIA

O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from one end to the other mightily, and sweetly ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Imagine what a life without fear would be like.

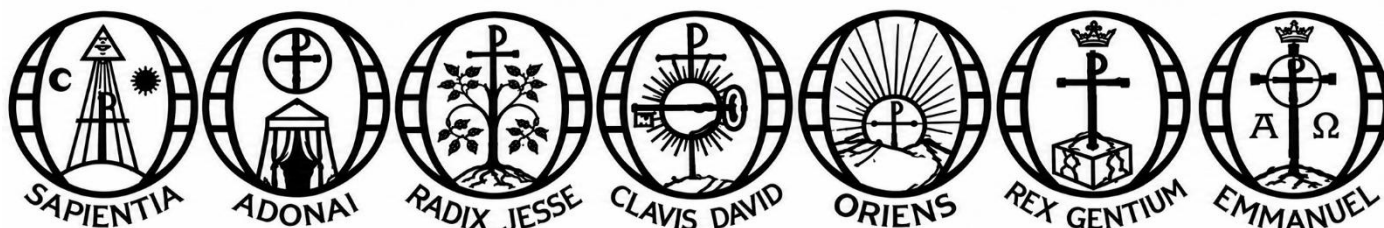


FRIDAY 18TH DECEMBER | O ADONAI

O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai: Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.' The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

And now notice Zechariah's words are spoken to his son directly.



**Shout, as you
journey home,
songs be in every
mouth, lo, from the
North they come,
from East and West
and South: In Jesus
all shall find their
rest, in him the
universe be blest.**

Fragile Glory | John 1:1–14

The hymn gathers the voices of north, south, east and west into one great song, calling all creation to celebrate the homecoming of its King. Yet he is not recognised or welcomed by his own. The one through whom all life came into being shares our mortality, enters a world divided by darkness and light, and offers us the possibility of becoming children of God. The journey home reaches its fulfilment in fragile glory, as God comes to dwell among humanity, making his home with us and inviting us to find our home in him.



SATURDAY 19TH DECEMBER | O RADIX JESSE

O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples; before you kings will shut their mouths, to you the nations will make their prayer: Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

Why does John begin his Christmas story before the beginning of time?



SUNDAY 20TH DECEMBER | O CLAVIS DAVID

O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel; you open and no one can shut; you shut and no one can open: Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house, those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

How does John paint a picture of Jesus as the resting place for North and South, East and West that we see in the final verse of our hymn?



MONDAY 21ST DECEMBER | O ORIENS

*O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.*

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Some believe that the writer of this Gospel had once been a disciple of John the Baptist. How might this affect the way he explains the significance of Elizabeth's son?



TUESDAY 22ND DECEMBER | O REX GENTIUM

*O King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone making both one:
Come and save the human race, which you fashioned from clay.*

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

What sort of kingdom gathers around one rejected by his own people and yet who welcomes anyone into his very family?



WEDNESDAY 23RD DECEMBER | O EMMANUEL

O Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver, the hope of the nations and their Saviour: Come and save us, O Lord our God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Father in heaven, who sent your Son to redeem the world and will send him again to be our judge: give us grace so to imitate him in the humility and purity of his first coming that, when he comes again, we may be ready to greet him with joyful love and firm faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

How does God making his home with us, and us in him, complete our 'The Journey Home' season for this Advent?