

*...the Lord himself will give you a sign.
The virgin will conceive and give birth
to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

Isaiah 7:14



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Preparation

Advent is a time of preparation: a time when we prepare, for the coming of our Christ in the form of a new-born baby, for the coming of Emmanuel, our God with us.

And it's also a time when, for most of us, we get ready to enjoy the festive season, buying gifts, preparing food, decorating our homes.

That spirit of preparation is very evident at St Mary's, in India, where the lovely, hand-embroidered Christmas tablecloth, which is proving so popular this season, is made.

Work on the orders from Traidcraft and other fair trade organisations, begins early in the year.

There is cloth to be cut, threads to be dyed, work to be allocated, stitching, sewing, washing and ironing to be done, not to mention the packing, shipping and invoicing.

All of that takes careful preparation on the part of the 450 women – Hindu, Muslim and Christian – who work with St Mary's.

Their reward is not just the income which is so important to them and their families, it is the harmony, security and sense of belonging which make St Mary's such a special place. These are wonderful gifts.

Use these stories from St Mary's to reflect on your own preparations this Advent season and the way in which God prepares us for His coming.

And, if you can, use one of the tablecloths – at home or in church – to make a special and personal connection with the women at St Mary's. (Product code: 29124)



Traidcraft plc offers the UK's widest range of fair trade food, craft and textile products from more than 100 producer groups in almost 30 countries.

Traidcraft Exchange is the only UK charity dedicated to making trade work for the poor, through development projects in producer communities and through lobbying and campaigning in the UK and Europe.

When you use these resources, please consider taking up a special offering to support the work of our charity, Traidcraft Exchange.

Collection envelopes (ref 51520) and collection boxes (ref 50588) are available from 0191 497 6445.

Prayer.

O Lord our God, you are a God of wonders.

You give us everything good in our lives, and for all those good things, we give you thanks.

You take the threads of our lives and weave them together to make beautiful moments, full of colour and joy.

You give us others to enrich our lives whether they are at home or far away.



We thank you that our lives can be touched by the skill and artistry of people we shall never meet.

We pray that through the work of Traidcraft, good things will continue to come to all those who bring to us the beautiful objects we use to remind us of the time of preparation that is Advent.

Amen.



Prayer.

Lord, we hear the cry to prepare for your coming but sometimes we ignore it.
Forgive us,

And help us to act on what we hear.

Lord, we hear the cry of the poor and the dispossessed but fail to act on their behalf.
Forgive us,

And help us to act on what we hear.

Lord we hear the cry of the sick, the sad and the sorrowing but sometimes we dismiss it.
Forgive us,

And help us to act on what we hear.

Lord we hear the cry of anguish from foreign lands but we do not let it touch us.
Forgive us,

And help us to act on what we hear.

Lord in the busyness of our lives,
in the misuse of our time,
in the preparation for the festival that should be yours but has become all about us,
we miss the cry to prepare for your coming,
because we have missed all the cries of your people.
Forgive us,

And help us to hear your cry in our midst. Amen

The stories.

In the beginning....

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2: 10:

In 1954, a group of Dominican nuns from Spain arrived in Ahmedabad, India, to start a hospital. The sisters found great poverty and homes without sanitation, poor hygiene and low life skills.

At the time, Ahmedabad was an industrial city, famous for its textiles, with 17 mills. But, gradually, the mills began to close and many men lost their jobs, with women becoming the sole earners.

In 1969, Sister Lucia, who had enjoyed embroidery as a child in Spain, began running classes for women and children. This led to the setting up of a sewing and embroidery centre, where women use traditional skills to make handicrafts.



Today, there are 400 women embroidering in their homes and 50 working at St Mary's, which is a pioneering example of Muslims, Hindus and Christians working together in harmony.

The embroidery centre is run from the first floor of St Mary's, where there are also tailoring classes. Beneath this, there is the maternity ward, dispensary and clinic for the community.

All children go to school and St Mary's provides assistance, if necessary. Today, nearly all families have water and toilets in their homes.

St Mary's is based in Gontipur, a very poor part of the city, in an area with a history of religious tension.

Riots in 1969, 1992 and 2002, plus the burning of homes, have personally affected not just the women working for St Mary's but also the wider community.

In 2002, at the height of the rioting, around 6000 people fleeing the communal violence, found shelter in the St Mary's compound.

Many Muslim homes were burned, with many women losing their homes. Traidcraft was one of the organisations that sent money to help with re-building.

For both of us, life! – Kokila’s story

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people.

Galatians 6:10

Christian, Muslim and Hindu women all work together to produce Traidcraft’s Christmas tablecloths.

Among those who do the tailoring work is Kokila Parmar, who has worked at St Mary’s for 20 years and is a member of St Joseph’s RC Church in the neighbouring parish.

For Kokila, St Mary’s has been a lifeline, not just providing work but supporting her as she looked after her husband, Pius, who had tuberculosis.

Illness meant Pius could not have a permanent job so Kokila’s wages from St Mary’s were the main income for them and their son, Joyal. Sadly, when Joyal was just 18 months old, Pius died. Kokila and her son lived with her in-laws for five years and then moved to a house close to St Mary’s.

Now, Joyal is 17 years old and is in 11th standard at school. He hopes to study for a BCA, made possible through the savings from Kokila’s earnings and a loan she will take out from St Mary’s.



Ask Kokila what work for St Mary’s means for her and she says simply: “Life. For both of us, life.”

And how does she celebrate Christmas?

“We make sweets. We go a little early during the weekdays of Christmas week to prepare the decoration of the house. We whitewash the house*. We have a crib in the house and put up the star and then a series of lights.

“My main hope is my son, because I have no other family, that he may study well and get a good job.”

**Most of the homes are whitewashed inside and so Christians prepare by removing all their brass jugs and vessels from the shelves, whitewashing the walls and rearranging the displays.*

A meditation on Preparation

Preparing the table at any festival, is a ground-work for all that is added.

In Advent we lay the table in preparation and expectation of all that is to come.

I shake out the gleaming red, green and gold and lay it on the table.

I smooth it, this cloth once held by loving, working hands in a country far away.

I touch the threads carefully stitched by the fingers of Hindu, Muslim and Christian women.

I think of the work of people I have never met, their lives, their joys, their fears.

They are so like us, while living in what seems a different world.

They fear for their families, that they will not find work.

They want to live in security and safety, not threatened by others.

They need shelter and food, warmth and companionship, a just and fair society.



Working together they make this beautiful cloth.

Working together we make our festive preparation.

Working together they know peace, and the joy of expectation.

Working together we can be satisfied that through them, all is now prepared for your coming.

What makes this cloth special is almost a quarter of a century of fair trade between St. Mary's and Traidcraft.

What makes it so special is that the women who worked on it speak freely of how the work enhances their lives in a poor part of Ahmedabad.

What makes this cloth special is the shared laughter and thought that have gone into the stitching.

What makes it so special is that I know it has significance and importance to so many people, that its value goes far beyond what I see.

As I lay daily bread on my table, I will know

You have helped lay the *roji roti* (daily bread) on the table of women far away.

A meditation from the staff and women at St Mary's:

A tryst is generally a beginning of something momentous.

Precisely! Once the celebrations are over life will go on, but it need not go on the way it was going on earlier.

Christmas is an invitation to transformation.

It is the celebration of the unimaginable extraordinary in the everyday ordinary.



That happened at the very first Christmas too.

The usual beautiful night skies are lit up with a new brilliance of the brightest star ever, a simple manger transforms into a palace, shepherds become royal courtiers, and an ordinary carpenter's new-born son is announced as the prince of peace.

Nature need no longer become progressively barren and desolate.

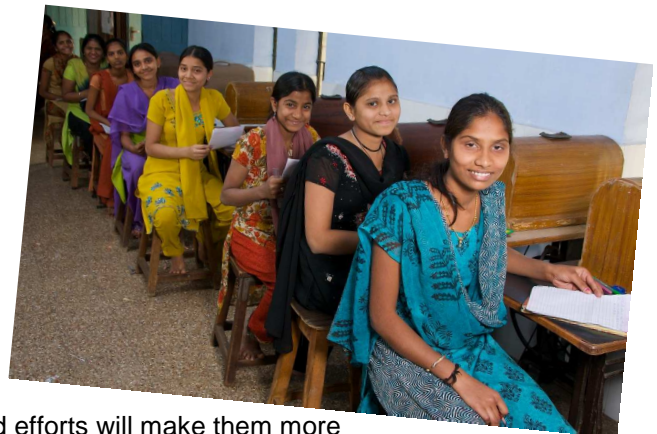
The world need not go on a self-destruct programme, no longer perishable and doomed to helplessness and destruction.

The Christmas happening is a wake-up call to all of us for a change of heart,

an invitation sent out to humanity to opt for another kind of lifestyle,

a changed lifestyle that will transform and open up the ordinary into pathways of peace and justice, joy and love,

a lifestyle that will make bearable all the challenges that daily living so burden us with.



The challenges will still be there but our own graced efforts will make them more joyfully bearable,

And the life that goes on will be a kind of life that we can happily look forward to!

May you choose this kind of option too and have a lifetime of wonder and blessings to look forward to as your own extraordinary life goes on.

Christmas blessings and the peace of the New Year to you!

Srs. Lucia and Silvia.

More things you can do

- Use only fair trade refreshments in your church. For details of our refreshments account go to www.traidcraft.co.uk/refreshments or call 0870 444 1543.
- Make a real difference to the poor by selling fair trade products in your church. Go to www.traidcraft.co.uk/fairtrader or call 0870 444 1543.
- Take up a special offering to support the work of our charity Traidcraft Exchange. Collection envelopes are available from 0191 4976445. Gift Aid can add an extra 28p to every £1 you donate!
- Learn more about fair trade – book a speaker. Email speakers@traidcraft.co.uk or call 0191 497 6418
- Campaign with us – and help change the way the world trades. Go to www.traidcraft.co.uk/campaign
- Become a Fairtrade Church. Go to www.fairtrade.org.uk/get_involved

See for yourself!

St Mary's is one of the producer groups visited on Traidcraft's Meet the People tour to Western India.

For more information on the tours see www.traidcraft.co.uk/mtp



- Please pray for us and the producers we work with. We rely heavily on your prayers and we never undervalue their importance or their effectiveness.

For more ideas for your prayers see www.traidcraft.org.uk/prayercall

Find more information and resources at www.traidcraft.org.uk/churchresources