

North Staffordshire Circuit (11/22)

Service Sheets For the Month of December 2023

Compiled by:
Rev'd Liz Singleton
Rev'd Christine Legge
Rev'd Joy Ventom
Mrs Sheila Heap

Sunday 3rd December 2023 – Advent Sunday

This service has been compiled by Mrs Sheila Heap

Whoever and wherever you are, you are very welcome to share in this short act of Worship.

Please remember that you are being held in prayer as you share this time.



Opening Prayer:

As the adventure of Advent begins,
let us prepare to meet with God.

Let us bring our hopes and expectations.

Let us prepare ourselves for what God wants of us.

Let God find us ready and waiting. **Amen.**

Hymn: Sing We The King (StF 185)

Sing we the King who is coming to reign;
Glory to Jesus, the Lamb who was slain!
Life and salvation His empire shall bring,
Joy to the nations when Jesus is King.

*Refrain: Come let us sing: praise to our King:
Jesus our King, Jesus our King;
This is our song who to Jesus belong:
Glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.*

All shall be well in His Kingdom of peace;
Freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;
Justice and truth from His sceptre shall spring;
Wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King:

Refrain:

Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;
Doubt shall not darken His witness within;
Hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;
Love is victorious when Jesus is King:

Refrain:

Kingdom of Christ, for Your coming we pray;
Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
When this new song Your creation shall sing;
Satan is vanquished when Jesus is King:

Refrain:

Charles Silvester Horne (1865 – 1914)

Isaiah was a prophet around 750 years before Jesus was born, prophesying close to Jerusalem. Not much is known about him other than he had great literacy skills and a deep concern for social justice and the character of God. This is a helpful passage to begin our Advent journey which will end just a few miles away in Bethlehem. These remarkable words have been seen by Christians as a reflection of the character of Jesus – the One who will bring light to a dark world; a message full of hope. It points to a time of justice and peace and the reign of a very different Kingdom. It is for this Kingdom to which we are called to watch, pray and be ready.

Bible Reading: Isaiah 9:2-9

‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy
They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest,
As men rejoice when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian’s defeat,
You have shattered the yoke that burdens them,
The bar across their shoulders,
The rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior’s boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
To us a son is given,
And the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government there will be no end.
He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom,
Establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness

From that time on and for ever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Prayer:

Sovereign God, we thank You that you judge not by the outside
But by the person underneath;
Not simply by our faithless actions
But by our underlying desire to serve You.
Where we are swift to condemn, You are looking to forgive;
Where we are eager to find fault, You are willing to make allowances.
You do not condone our mistakes, but You are always ready to show
mercy;
to believe in our potential rather than dwell on our past record.
Save us from interpreting Your judgment in terms of our own narrow
horizons,
from attributing to You a strictness which reflects our own attitudes and
denies Your grace.
Teach us to forgive as You have forgiven us,
and to leave final judgment in Your hands where it belong.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

You may like to join in the **Lord's Prayer** here... Our Father, who art in
heaven, Hallowed by Thy name ...

Introduction:

Jesus tells the disciples to keep alert for the coming of God. He encourages
them to read the signs of the times. But no one knows the day or the hour,
so they are to keep awake at all times.

How many times do we get caught out because we weren't prepared: we're
late because we forgot about rush hour; or there's no milk for that late night
drink? While on these occasions we can ring ahead, or nip to the corner
shop, if necessary, there's no 'plan B' if we are not ready for Jesus.

Bible Reading: Mark 13:24-37

“But in those days, following that distress,
‘the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

“At that time, men will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And He will send His angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

The Day and Hour Unknown

“No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, not the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away. He leaves his house, and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.”

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping, what I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

Meditation:

The time is coming, they tell me:

the day of the Lord’s return,
when we shall stand before Him
and He will separate the sheep from the goats,
the wicked from the righteous.

So forget about the present,
think instead of the future,
for that’s what matters –
our final destiny,
the life to come –
nothing else.

Well, I’m sorry, but have I missed something?

For that’s not the way I heard it,

Not what I thought Jesus was saying at all.

Keep alert, He warned, certainly,

For the day will dawn as God has promised,

But when that will be we've no idea;
Today, tomorrow or far beyond, who can say?
It's not the 'when' of His coming that should concern us,
But the fact that He will,
And the difference that makes not to the future, but to the here and now,
To the way we live every moment of every day.
We've a job to be doing,
A broken world out there needing to know His love;
And that's what will concern Him when He comes,
Not whether we've been looking forward eagerly to His Kingdom
But whether we're doing something to make it happen,
To help build heaven on earth.
So what will He find in you?
A life dedicated to His service, continuing His ministry where He left off,
Or an obsession about the future so strong that you've forgotten about the
present?
A life lived for others, or a preoccupation with yourself, with securing your
own salvation.
Don't think I doubt His promise.
The time is coming, just as they say, a day when we will be called to
account,
Made to answer for the way we've lived our lives.
But if I were you I wouldn't dwell on that for too long:
I'd get down to the business of discipleship,
To walking the way of the Cross,
Or otherwise, you may find, when the moment comes and judgement is
pronounced,
That the verdict is very different from the one you had in mind.

Nick Fawcett – 'Worship Through the Seasons'

**Hymn: As Servants Working An Estate (StF491) (Can be sung to StF
213 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' or SfF 205 'It Came Upon the
Midnight Clear')**

As servants working an estate
Whose owner is away,
And whose return
They all await
Though no-one knows the day,

So none of us can name the hour,
The season or the year
When Christ with all of heaven's power
Will suddenly appear.

Our task is not to calculate
What angels do not know,
But faithfully to watch and wait
And Christ's compassion show.
Not loading fragile human schemes
With hopes they cannot bear,
We trust the promise that redeems
The present from despair.

For Christ the Lord will surely come,
The King whom kings will fear,
And with God's perfect justice plumb
The justice we do here,
Revealing that the present age
And every age that's past
Are not the final moral gauge
That judges us at last.

So guide, Lord Christ, our every choice
That when our hearts shall hear
Your step, Your knock, Your calling voice
We will not hide in fear,
But welcome You from realms above
To Your estate below,
Where justice, mercy, peace and love
Abundantly will flow.

Thomas H. Troeger (b. 1945)

'Pause For Thought'

A young professional woman decided to seek her fortune, discern her vocation, and potentially change her life for the better by moving to England. She relocated to London where she began studies for an advanced degree, seeking new opportunities in the world of work.

Her great love was an insatiable love for professional basketball. She took every opportunity to watch it – television, internet, live streaming – but this caused a problem. Most games started around 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening,

but when taking the different time zones into account, it usually meant they were available to watch here late at night or early morning! When her favourite team reached the World Cup finals it was to be shown in the middle of the night. As she sat in front of the television, the inevitable happened – she fell asleep, only to wake up to see the closing credits scrolling down the screen! Yes – her team had won – but she had missed the journey and the excitement.

She wrote on her Facebook page: “I’ve waited years for a moment like this, and, of course, I slept through it.”

The passage from Mark’s Gospel sets the tone for the Christian season of Advent with some very good advice: “Something important is happening! Stay awake! Don’t miss it!”

The difficulty for us is that when the passage was written, it’s original expectation was for a cosmic event in the foreseeable future that the hearers or first readers of Mark’s Gospel would experience for themselves. It was expected that the current age would come to an end and a new and different Kingdom would be established. We cannot be certain whether what Jesus actually said was accurately recorded by Mark, which causes us some difficulty as to what Jesus meant and how Mark envisaged what the end of the Age was supposed to look like. As we look back through history, we could have said: ‘This is it!’ many times, even as to what is happening in the world today. Clearly, the event was not imminent. Not even Jesus knew the ‘where’ or ‘how’.

So what are we to read into this passage? Jesus certainly made a remarkable pronouncement, and it’s a personal one about watching and waiting – and staying awake. At any moment in human history – including our generation – God’s interruption of the ordinary flow of life can and does break in. Why? Simply put, it’s because we are to understand that the universe is grounded in God who is the source and energy of everything. We live with God’s energy flowing in and through us, giving us life and purpose, now and for the future. And that is exciting. We are part of God’s ongoing plan for His creation, which is why we need to be alert, waiting and ready. We do not know what will happen next!

Advent reminds us that God is busy revolutionising the lives of those who love Him and we can be part of that – or miss it by not recognising that God is waiting for us to respond.

We are challenged to stay alert to the power and promises of God. They come endlessly, surprisingly and in ways we sometimes least expect. We are loved and part of God's plan for the coming Kingdom. The gifts of the power and presence of God are all around us and will continue to be so. That is our eternal hope.

"I've waited years for a moment like this, and, of course, I slept through it."

So, this Advent, let's be ready – for ALL God wants to share with us.

If you have an Advent ring or candle, you might like to light it (taking great care) and spend a few moments focussing what your hopes are: for yourself, the Church and for all God's creation and how God might use you to become part of the answer to what you hope for.

Hymn: Great Is The Darkness That Covers The Earth (StF 405)

Great is the darkness that covers the earth,
Oppression, injustice and pain.
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,
Though many have come in Your name.
Watching while sanity dies,
Touched by the madness and lies.

*Refrain: Come, Lord Jesus,
Come, Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit we pray,
Come, Lord Jesus,
Come, Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit on us today.*

May now Your Church rise with power and love,
In every nation salvation will come
To those who believe in Your name.
Help us bring light to this world
That we might speed Your return.

Refrain:

Great celebrations on that final day
When out of the heavens You come.
Darkness will vanish, all sorrow will end,

And rulers will bow at Your throne.
Our great commission complete,
Then face to face we will meet.

Refrain:

Gerald Coates (b. 1944) and Noel Richardson (b. 1955)

Prayers of Love and Concern:

Lord, we pray for those living in darkness – waiting for the light of hope:

For those living in the darkest places in the world:

Where there is war and civil unrest; where there is inequality and injustice;
those suffering through natural disasters; those living in poverty; those who
cannot find employment; those suffering from addictions; those who are
seeking direction and purpose in life.

For those waiting for news:

Those waiting for news of loved ones; those waiting for test results; those
waiting for an answer to prayer.

For Your Church, seeking to share Your good news within their Church
families and communities:

For people to discern Your will and respond; to be open and welcoming to
all; to find ways to connect with those who do not know You; to be
generous with time and talent.

For those who have lost someone close; those looking to be healed; those
who are lonely, anxious or depressed.

For ourselves, that we will hear Your voice in a new way this Advent time
that we might be ready to celebrate the gift of Christ coming among us in
humility.

Lord, we come to You in our need, bringing our spoken and unspoken
prayers for a world in need.

In Your mercy hear these our prayers. Amen.

Hymn: Hear The Call Of The Kingdom (StF 407)

Hear the call of the Kingdom,
Lift your eyes to the King;
Let His song rise within you
As a fragrant offering

Of how God, rich in mercy,
Came in Christ to redeem
All who trust in His unfailing grace.

*Refrain: King of heaven, we will answer the call,
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
Filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name.*

Hear the call of the Kingdom
To be children of light
With the mercy of heaven,
The humility of Christ;
Walking justly before Him,
Loving all that is right,
That the life of Christ may shine through us.

Refrain:

Hear the call of the Kingdom
To reach out to the lost
With the Father's compassion
In the wonder of the Cross,
Bringing peace and forgiveness,
And a hope yet to come:
Let the nation put their trust in Him.

Refrain:

Keith Getty (b.1974); Kristyn Getty (b.1980) and Stuart Townend (b.1963)

Blessing:

Lord, we begin our Advent journey, waiting for You with love and patience.

Help us to remember that You will return for us and for those yet to know You.

Help us to be patient and alert, but help us also to be acting and serving and building Your Kingdom,

in the power and presence of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, Your everlasting love and the power of Your Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Sunday 10th December 2023 – Second Sunday of Advent

This service has been compiled by Rev'd Joy Ventom

Call to Worship:

Bring your thoughts, bring your feelings,
bring your busyness, bring your chaos,
bring your calm, bring your worries,
bring your hopes and your fears.
Bring it all here – and put it all down for a while...
and let the light of God fill the space.

Hymn: Go Tell It On The Mountains (H&P 135)

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus is his name.*

He possessed no riches, no home to lay his head;
He fasted in the desert, he gave to others bread:

He reached out and touched them, the blind, the deaf, the lame;
He spoke and listened gladly to anyone who came:

Some turned way in anger, with hatred in the eye;
They tried him and condemned him, then led him out to die:

'Father, now forgive them', upon the cross he said;
In three more days he was alive and risen from the dead:

He still comes to people, his life moves through the lands;
He uses us for speaking, he touches with our hands:

Prayers of Adoration and Confession:

Another awesome
Day dawns
Of life with our
Reliable, righteous,
Almighty God –
Totally trustworthy
In love, mercy and compassion;

**Our God, whose hand
Never lets us go.**

Forgive us, Lord, for focusing on our problems and not looking beyond them to you and the bigger picture. We can become frustrated and impatient when we are blind to, or unsure of, the way ahead. And often we take things into our own hands instead of waiting for your perfect timing. Forgive us for getting wrapped up in the commercialism of Christmas, instead of feasting our eyes on the Messiah, heaven's true gift of Christmas.

**Lord God, we're sorry.
John was persistent and lived his message of Jesus.
Help us to humble ourselves
and to live out your good news today.**

By freely admitting and confessing our sins,
we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, Son of God.
Through the power of his blood, shed for us, we are forgiven.
Amen.

**Bible Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11
Comfort for God's People**

40 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the Lord's hand

double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

The Word of God Stands Forever

⁶ A voice says, “Cry!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All flesh is grass,

and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades

when the breath of the Lord blows on it;

surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,

but the word of our God will stand forever.

The Greatness of God

⁹ Go on up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good news;

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good news;

lift it up, fear not;

say to the cities of Judah,

“Behold your God!”

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord God comes with might,

and his arm rules for him;

behold, his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms;

he will carry them in his bosom,

and gently lead those that are with young.

Hymn: From Heaven You Came (The Servant King) (StF 272)

From Heaven You Came, Helpless Babe,

Entered Our World, Your Glory Veiled;

Not To Be Served But To Serve,

And Give Your Life That We Might Live.

This Is Our God, The Servant King,

He Calls Us Now To Follow Him,

*To Bring Our Lives As A Daily Offering
Of Worship To The Servant King.*

There In The Garden Of Tears,
My Heavy Load He Chose To Bear;
His Heart With Sorrow Was Torn,
'Yet Not My Will But Yours,' He Said.

Come, See His Hands And His Feet,
The Scars That Speak Of Sacrifice,
Hands That Flung Stars Into Space
To Cruel Nails Surrendered.

So Let Us Learn How To Serve,
And In Our Lives Enthroned Him;
Each Other's Needs To Prefer,
For It Is Christ We're Serving.

Bible Reading: Mark 1:1-8

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,

3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. **6** Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Thought for the Day:

Christmas is definitely the season for a movie. What's your favourite? Perhaps it's the mighty Elf? Or the classic It's a Wonderful Life? Or maybe

it's the best retelling of a Charles Dickens' classic: The Muppet Christmas Carol? Home Alone? Or a cheesy romance?

There's something very reassuring about a favourite Christmas movie – often so familiar that you can be assured there are no nasty shocks or surprises to come, and you can probably recite most of the script. The 'what's your favourite Christmas movie?' question is one piece of a jigsaw that for many of us is our Christmas. Other pieces include: the food, relatives, the tree, carols, nativity plays, holly, and all the family rituals.

The Christmas story itself is also something of a jigsaw where the pieces include: images of stars, angels, mangers, kings, shepherds – so many bits and pieces that make up Christmas.

So, it can be disconcerting when we bump into his week's Gospel reading. The story of a man in the desert baptizing people perhaps isn't one of the pieces. Does it even belong in our Christmas countdown? Well, Mark doesn't start his Gospel with Jesus' birth; indeed, he doesn't mention it at all. But this is where he begins Jesus' story. He tells us something that nativity plays generally do not. He tells us that this story of Jesus' is about the whole of creation standing on the brink of a total and radical transformation, a new beginning with God through the transforming presence of Jesus.

There are so many different pieces that come together to make our Christmas. When the big day arrives, the pieces in view may be those that relate to the success of our Christmas Day as human and family activity. Don't lose sight of the bigger picture, beyond the table and the stable: all this is about the arrival of a man who was God. Yes, born in a stable, but a man who will baptize with the Holy Spirit so that we may be transformed, so that all creation can be restored, so that through him we can find a true and transformed life with God our maker. That is Christmas in context.

Hymn: It Is A Thing Most Wonderful (H&P 224)

It is a thing most wonderful,
almost too wonderful to be,
that God's own Son should come from heaven,
and die to save a child like me.

And yet I know that it is true:
He chose a poor and humble lot,

and wept and toiled and mourned and died
for love of those who loved Him not.

It is most wonderful to know
His love for me so free and sure;
but 'tis more wonderful to see
my love for Him so faint and poor.

And yet I want to love Thee, Lord;
O light the flame within my heart,
and I will love Thee more and more,
until I see Thee as Thou art.

Prayers for Others:

We pray...

For those lost in valleys.

May they be lifted up.

For those stuck in the heights.

May they be helped down.

For those in barren places.

May they find shelter.

For those in rough places.

May they hear eternal words.

For those seeking forgiveness.

May they find it.

For those seeking apology.

May they hear it.

For those waiting for a long time.

May they find patience in your patience.

For those waiting for renewal.

May there be springs of growth.

Amen.

Hymn: Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus (StF 169)

Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.

Sending Out Prayer:

Lord, as we go into our week
may we look for more of you.
Help us to see more clearly,
to see further, to see what you see,
to see the whole picture –
and to live our faith each and every day.

Amen.

Sunday 17th December 2023 – Third Sunday of Advent

This service has been compiled by Rev'd Liz Singleton

Opening Words:

A voice cries in the wilderness,

‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’

We too prepare for the coming of the Lord, the birth of Jesus,
and make straight our lives to meet our God.

Hymn: O Come, O Come, Immanuel (StF 180/H&P 85)

O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear:

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, O come, O Lord of might
who to your tribes, on Sinai's height,
in ancient times didst give the law
in cloud, and majesty, and awe:

O come, O Rod of Jesse, free
Your own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell your people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave:

O come, O Key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery:

O come, O Day-spring, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Prayer:

Holy One, we wait for you to come again,

baby-small and vulnerable,
to grace our poverty and our humanity,
with a heart beat, a breath and a cry.

Holy One, you wait for us to notice you again,
baby-small and vulnerable,
here in these people and in this place,
present in a heart beat, a breath and a cry.
May the guiding Spirit once again bring
your waiting and our waiting together,
to lift up the vulnerable,
and confirm the beauty of our humanity,
each heart beat, every breath and cry
bringing to birth renewed lives
filled with everlasting hope.

Amen

Bible Reading: Isaiah 9:2 NLT

The people who walk in darkness
will see a great light.
For those who live in a land of deep darkness,
a light will shine.

We See The Light by Peter Millar

In violent times,
beautiful words,
centuries old,
resonant with truth:

‘Because of your light, Lord,
we see the light.’

That light, even now,
illuminating
our terror- stricken age
with the possibility of change:
offering our over-burdened hearts
a resting place
that a deeper compassion

may be our companion –

an energy of love
to struggle for justice,
to be a wounded healer,
to share what we have,
to carry hope in our hearts,
to laugh and to love,
perhaps, all in one day!

Hymn: Into The Darkness Of This World (StF 173)

Into the darkness of this world,
into the shadows of the night;
into this loveless place you came,
lightened our burdens, eased our pain,
and made these hearts your home.
Into the darkness once again,
Oh come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with your love
to make us whole,
come with your light to lead us on,
driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Into the longing of our souls,
into these heavy hearts of stone,
shine on us now your piercing light,
order our lives and souls aright,
by grace and love unknown,
Until in you our hearts unite -
Oh come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with your love
to make us whole,
come with your light to lead us on,
driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

O Holy Child, Emmanuel,
hope of the ages, God with us,
visit again this broken place,
til all the earth declares your praise
and your great mercies own.
Now let your love be born in us,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come in Your glory,
take your place,
Jesus, the Name above all names,
we long to see you face to face,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Introducing the NT reading:

To a world so torn and tortured
Came the voice of one who knew
What it cost to lift oppression
Challenge the accepted view.

John convicted crowds before him,
Charged hypocrisy with God;
Opened up the way for Jesus
Who would follow where he trod.

Bible Reading: John 1: 6 - 8, 19 – 28

God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light.

This was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, "Who are you?" He came right out and said, "I am not the Messiah."

"Well then, who are you?" they asked. "Are you Elijah?"

"No," he replied.

"Are you the Prophet we are expecting?"

"No."

"Then who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“I am a voice shouting in the wilderness,

‘Clear the way for the LORD’s coming!’”

Then the Pharisees who had been sent asked him, “If you aren’t the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?”

John told them, “I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize. Though his ministry follows mine, I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal.”

This encounter took place in Bethany, an area east of the Jordan River, where John was baptizing.

Our reading shines a spotlight on John the Baptist. In the first three short verses we learn four things about John:

- that he was ‘sent’ from God
- that he ‘came...to testify to the light’
- that he came to enable others to believe
- he is NOT to be confused with Jesus – who is the light of the world

Then, just in case we didn’t quite get it, this is repeated in the second part of the reading, but at greater length and in a more dramatic fashion. Here the priests, Levites and Pharisees ask questions on our behalf. In his answers John cites the prophet Isaiah, stressing the point that the Scriptures they already know are about to be fulfilled. One of the key test for true faith and Christian ministry is that we don’t become confused about who we are. John knows who he is and the part he has to play. He stands in the great prophetic line that stretches through the Old Testament. John is not the Messiah, he is simply a herald of what is to come.

Hymn: On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry (StF 182/ H&P 84)

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings from the King of kings.

Then cleansed be every life from sin;
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare

for Christ to come and enter there.

For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge, and our great reward;
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick stretch out your hand,
and bid the fallen sinner stand;
shine forth, and let your light restore
earth's own true loveliness once more.

To God the Son all glory be
whose advent sets his people free,
whom, with the Father, we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

Reflection:

“I am a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Clear the way for the LORD’s coming!’”

Those words are from Isaiah 40 and you may have heard them last week for that chapter of Isaiah was last week’s set Old Testament reading. Just to offer you a little reminder, that reading elaborates on John’s words and talks about filling in valleys and levelling mountains and hills, straightening curves and smoothing out the rough places. And these words, of course, aren’t about ensuring that Jesus gets an easier walk when he arrives! No – these words are about us. What are the valleys and the mountains in our lives that we need to do something about in order to make ourselves ready to welcome Jesus. What are the curves that take us away from God and where are the bumps that slow us down as we try to follow Jesus– in other words what do we need to change in order to be living in the ways he has shown us so that we will be aware of his presence when he comes and be ready to respond.

Edward Banyard puts it like this:

The voice which cries
In our own particular wilderness
Calls for a change in the way
We see and value things
In our high production,
High consumption society;

In our success driven world.

Our God is a biased God,
Biased in favour of the poor and needy;
Biased in favour of the misfits,
The rejects,
The rebels;
Biased in favour of the people
Who've made a thorough mess of their lives.
And the voices cries:
'Will you not see them as I see them?'
'Will you not care for them as I care?'

Lord,
if you discount parking and speeding offences
we're a pretty law-abiding group of people,
but,
at times,
you do give us the uncomfortable feeling
that being law-abiding isn't quite enough.
Help us to better understand
what you mean by righteousness and justice.
Help us to make your values our values,
and strengthen our will
to witness and work for your ways
by the things we count important
and the manner in which
we live our everyday lives.

Prayer:

Come, reveal yourself within our world, Lord.
Come with your message of justice and peace:
to the poor and exploited;
to lives overshadowed by conflict.
Loving God: help us to prepare the way for Christ.

Come, reveal yourself in our community, Lord.
Come with your friendship and concern:
to the lonely and unloved;
to lives overshadowed by suffering.

Loving God: **help us to prepare the way for Christ.**

Come, reveal yourself in the church, Lord.
Come with the gift of your Holy Spirit:
to both young and old on the journey of faith;
to lives overshadowed by doubt.

Loving God: **help us to prepare the way for Christ.**

Come, reveal yourself in human lives, Lord.
Come with the offering of salvation:
to the sinner and the seeker;
to lives overshadowed by emptiness.

Loving God: **help us to prepare the way for Christ.**

Come, that we may know you with us in our need, Lord.
Come with all-sufficient love:
to the sick and anxious;
to lives overshadowed by sorrow.

Loving God: **help us to prepare the way for Christ.**

By our words, prayers and actions,

Loving God: **help us to prepare the way for Christ.**

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: Hark The Glad Sound! (StF 171/H&P 82)

Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long;
let every heart prepare a throne,
and every voice a song.

He comes the prisoners to release,
in Satan's bondage held;
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
your welcome shall proclaim;
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with your beloved name.

Closing Words:

God, our hope and our desire,
we wait for your coming
as a woman longs for the birth,
the exile for her home,
the lover for the touch of his beloved,
and the humble poor for justice.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen

Sunday 24th December 2023 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

This service has been compiled by Rev'd Christine Legge

Call to Worship:

Lay aside your thoughts about cooking the turkey tomorrow.

Lay aside any worries about whether you've got everything.

Lay aside concerns about visitors or visits.

And instead...

fill your mind with the story of the stable,

feel the peace the Christ child brings,

experience the joy of heaven at the birth of God's Son,

and open your heart to the Lord.

Hymn: There's A Light Upon The Mountains (StF188)

There's a light upon the mountains,

and the day is at the spring,

When our eyes shall see the beauty

and the glory of the King;

Weary was our heart with waiting, and

the night-watch seemed so long,

But His triumph-day is breaking, and

we hail it with a song.

There's a hush of expectation, and

a quiet in the air;

And the breath of God is moving in

the fervent breath of prayer;

For the suffering, dying Jesus is the

Christ upon the throne,

And the travail of our spirit is the

travail of His own.

He is breaking down the barriers,

He is casting up the way;

He is calling for His angels to build

up the gates of day;

But His angels here are human, not

the shining hosts above,

For the drum-beats of His army are

the heart-beats of our love.

Hark! we hear a distant music, and
it comes with fuller swell;
'Tis the triumph song of Jesus, of
our King Emmanuel;
Zion, go ye forth to meet Him,
and my soul, be swift to bring
All thy sweetest and thy dearest for
the triumph of our King.

Henry Burton (1840-1930)

Prayer of Adoration:

Father God, you are faithful and true, full of power and mercy.
You grace the world with salvation,
the gift of your Son who we eagerly await.
Your Holy Spirit moves among us, filling us with joyful expectation.
Your love knows no end.
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
we lift our hearts to you. **Amen.**

A Prayer of Confession:

(read reflectively and consider how Mary must have felt and her response)

God, you chose Mary, a young girl not yet married, to take part in your story.
You chose her for one of the greatest acts of obedience ever demanded.
You asked her to risk everything.
How must she have felt?
Stunned? Puzzled? Scared?
She must have wondered how Joseph would react.
He could have refused to marry her.
The consequences would not have been pleasant.
An unmarried mother.
An outcast.
Joseph, however, came good.
But Mary agreed to your will, God, before knowing that.
She put her whole life in your hands.
Yes, she had total trust in you.

Prayer: *(read reflectively and consider your response)*

God, your call on our lives will never be as great as that of Mary, mother of our Lord and Saviour. Yet still we may hesitate, have doubts, and question the consequences. And perhaps think the risk too great to follow through. Forgive our lack of trust, our doubts and fears. Help us to be like Mary, open to you, wholly obedient and trusting in all things. Let it be according to your will in my life. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness:

God sent Jesus as a living sacrifice to atone for our sins once and for all. Through him our sins are washed clean, forgiven and forgotten. **Amen**

Bible Readings: Jeremiah 3: 31 – 34

³¹ “The days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

³² It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to^[a] them,^[b]”
declares the LORD.

³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.

“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the LORD.

“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”

Romans 12: 1 – 2

A Living Sacrifice

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

John 15: 1 – 10

The Vine and the Branches

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

⁹ “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.

Hymn: Tell Out My Soul (StF 186)

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his Name!
Make known his strength, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age to same;

his holy Name--the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

Reflection:

The writer Sue Monk Kidd, in one of her books, recalls her youth and how she would prepare for Christmas.

In early December, she would sit by the wooden nativity set clustered under their Christmas tree and think over the last year of her life.

She would think deeply about Christmas and the coming of Jesus.

She remembers, one time, visiting a monastery. It was a couple of weeks before Christmas. As she passed a monk walking outside, she greeted him with,

"Merry Christmas."

The monk's response caught her off guard a bit.

"May Christ be born in you," he replied.

His words seemed strange and peculiar at the time. What did he mean,

"May Christ be born in you?"

At the time she was unsure of what he meant, but now all these years later, sitting beside the Christmas tree, she felt the impact of his words.

She discovered that Advent is a time of spiritual preparation.

It is also a time of transformation.

It is "discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from the waiting heart.

As we sit, awaiting the coming again of the Christ Child as we contemplate the meaning of what God did in the arrival of the Christ child we have the opportunity to consider this phrase a little more deeply 'May Christ be born in you'.

What evidence is there that this phrase might indeed be something we should be considering?

Well, the whole of the Christmas story confirms it surely, the God who throughout the Old Testament showed himself to be a God who wanted a relationship with His people, who wasn't a distant God or a God who only turned up when great ceremonies or sacrifices took place. He has always shown Himself to be a God who was intimately living beside His people.

When King David thought to build a Temple for the Lord, he sought the Prophet Nathan's confirmation. Initially Nathan said 'Go Ahead', but later he received a word from God indicating it was not His will.

The Lord pointed out that He had always been with His people – moving along with them as they travelled.'

He has always shown Himself to be a God Who wanted to be among His people and He shows that even more in the Christ-event.

God coming to live as one of us 'Immanuel' – God with us.

So that's the point from which we start, and which confirms we are on the right lines in seeking 'Christ to be born in each one of us'.

Each of our Bible passages encourage us to be aware of God's work in our lives. From Jeremiah we heard God saying:

'I will put my law within them,
And I will write it on their hearts;
And I will be their God
And they shall be my people.'

Paul says you should
'be transformed by the renewing of your minds',

And John records the beautiful, poetic imagery of Jesus - The true Vine, as he explains that the result of living in union with him, will be that 'you bear much fruit and become my disciples.'

So, we have a three-fold reason for needing
'Christ to be born in us'

Firstly, we have seen that it is how God has always worked in the past in the Old Testament as He travelled with the Israelites through the desert and in the New Testament through His coming to Birth in Jesus.

Secondly, so that we know the transforming and empowering love of God in our own individual lives.

And thirdly, so that we might be enabled to serve Him, as we live out His life in our lives.

It's very interesting how often co-incidences arise, Often they aren't that at all they are God-incidences.

At a Bible Study group while we were looking at the letter of Paul to Titus, a short letter, known as one of the Pastoral epistles written to the people of Crete, Paul is focussed on asking the question 'How should we be living as Christians' and in Chapter 3 verse 1 and repeated in verse 8 Paul writes: 'Remind the people to be ready to do whatever is good'.

Some study notes on that verse say 'Daily we are becoming more and more the people whom God has already declared us to be. Living from a different source is a reality!'

And that different source is Christ Jesus Living in us.

So the reason for praying

'May Christ be born in you'

Is not to encourage some self-glorification, or personal gain,

It is so that

'Christ may LIVE in you and THROUGH you'.

We referred to our Bible passages earlier, and in each of them there's a two-fold teaching, Sort of: this is done – so that this can happen ..

Jeremiah records the words of the Lord who will be our God and we His people

so that we will Know the Lord

– from the least to the greatest'

For Paul, the transforming of our minds'

isn't for some personal gain,

it is so that we may discern

what is the will of God'

And for the disciples attached to the Vine
It is so that we bear much fruit.

The blessing of Christ being born in us
Is so that we may live Him out in our daily lives.

The Christmas sermons of various notories
Were mentioned on the Radio
And there seemed to be a theme running through them,

That in these straitened times
When the economic situation is affecting so many and the news
give us only gloomy forecasts of worse to come,

When confidence in many areas of world leadership
Is in tatters

And all that our economic prosperity has been built on
Is seen to be as insubstantial as a mirage

we need to be out there offering Hope,
support,
comfort,
help

– we need to be aware of Christ's promptings

Which encourage us to get out of our comfort zone and put our faith into
action.

When there is so much anxiety and indeed despair among so many folk
We have a message
Of Hope in Christ
For all.

Before training for the Ministry I was at Cliff College in Derbyshire
for a year, the college motto is
'Christ for all - all for Christ'

In these difficult times, many are seeking to make sense of the world.
We are gloriously privileged to have the answer, and the awesome
responsibility to share it.

As we seek to cope with the current crises

And as we seek to show through our lives
The hope we have in us
And to share that with others
So, we must pray for each other

‘that Christ may be **born** in each one of us.’

In order that He may **live** in each of us, so that we may really have an impact on the family, community, society and world in which we live.

May Christ be born in you (me)

May Christ live in you (me).

Amen.

Hymn: Light Of The World, You Stepped Down Into Darkness

(StF 175)

Light of the world
You stepped down into darkness
Opened my eyes let me see
Beauty that made this heart adore You
Hope of a life spent with You

(Chorus)

So here I am to worship

Here I am to bow down

Here I am to say that you're my God

You're altogether lovely

Altogether worthy

Altogether wonderful to me

King of all days
Oh so highly exalted
Glorious in heaven above
Humbly you came to the earth you created
All for love's sake became poor

(Chorus)

And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross.
And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross.

(Chorus)

Tim Hughes

Prayers of Intercession:

We pray today for those who feel far from themselves and others. We pray that this Advent season might, in the midst of demand, provide soft nights and ease, so that people can return to themselves, knowing you, too, are always in the heart, and always wait for us with kindness.

We ask this, in the name of all that is good.

We remember today all who have not given their consent, but whose lives and bodies and integrity are taken for granted. For them, we pray for justice, reparation and truth.

We ask this, in the name of all that is good.

Today we remember that God surprised us by coming among us through the 'Yes' of Mary. Let us always be open to the surprise of finding God in unexpected places.

We ask this, in the name of all that is good. Amen.

This prayer was originally published in 2020.

Reflectively and slowly say The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: Sing We The King Who Is Coming To Reign (StF 185)

Sing we the King who is coming to reign;
glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!
Life and salvation his empire shall bring,
joy to the nations when Jesus is King:

*Come let us sing: praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King:
this is our song, who to Jesus belong:
glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.*

All shall be well in his kingdom of peace;
freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;
justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring;
wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King:

Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;
doubt shall not darken his witness within;
hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;
love is victorious when Jesus is King:

Kingdom of Christ, for your coming we pray;
hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
when this new song your creation shall sing;
Satan is vanquished and Jesus is King:

Charles Silvester Horne (1865-1914)

Blessing:

May the blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
be with you now and with all whom you love and cherish,
in this world and the next, this Christmas season,
and for evermore. **Amen.**

Monday 25th December 2023 – Christmas Day

This service has been compiled by Rev'd Liz Singleton

God in a manger,
God of surprises,
help us to unwrap
your present to us
this Christmas:
show us how to celebrate
your birth simply,
with justice
and with holy joy.

Hymn: Joy To The World (StF 330/H&P 77)

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding the joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Prayer:

We believe in Christmas.

We believe that the words of the prophet that speak of justice to the oppressed

and care for the widow are God's Word that sets the world free.

For love came down at Christmas

We believe in Christmas.

We believe in Christmas.

We believe that the light of the world that crushes all darkness and exposes all lies

is God's light that shines through every darkness.

For love came down at Christmas.

We believe in Christmas.

We believe in Christmas.

We believe that the song of the angels that celebrates peace on earth and to all people on the earth

is God's peace that the world cannot find but Jesus can offer.

For love came down at Christmas.

We believe in Christmas.

We believe in Christmas.

We believe that Mary's poem Magnificat, where God turns everything upside down,

where the poor are lifted up and the powerful are brought down,

is God's poem that changes the balance of the world.

For love came down at Christmas.

We believe in Christmas.

We believe in Christmas.

We believe the Word becomes flesh,

the promise is fulfilled,

the light breaks through,

the oppressed are set free,

the lowly are lifted up

and the baby cries.

For love came down at Christmas.

We believe in Christmas. Amen.

We remember again the story of Jesus' birth..... as told in the gospels of Matthew and Luke

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All of this occurred to fulfil the Lord's message through his prophet: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child!

She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means "God is with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendent of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He travelled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.

And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Saviour – yes, the Messiah, the Lord – has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognise him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven – praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

Hymn: Hark the Herald-Angels Sing (StF202/H&P 106)

Hark! The herald-angels sing
Glory to the new-born King,
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim:
‘Christ is born in Bethlehem.’
*Hark! The herald-angels sing
Glory to the new-born King.*

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of a virgin’s womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!
Hail, the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel:
*Hark! The herald-angels sing
Glory to the new-born King.*

Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light of life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.

Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth:
*Hark! The herald-angels sing
Glory to the new-born King.*

A Christmas Day Reflection:

This story is shared in a book called 'Shine On, Star of Bethlehem' published a number of years ago by Christian Aid. It's written by Wendy White.

I run a large shopping mall and with that goes all the attendant Christmas glitz, grottoes, trees, decorations, sales figures. I also inherited a tradition of local churches coming together for a small service of readings and carols on Christmas Eve. This has varied from the small and almost unnoticed to the organised and advertised when, one year, our local radio station used us as a venue.

One year the owners of the Centre declared that carol services were out. Personal preference perhaps but they were considered outmoded and not suitable. The year progressed and as we went through Autumn and published our Christmas schedule of events, children's entertainment, discount evenings and the like, there was, obviously, no carol service mentioned.

The calls then began and the visits to my office. 'Why?' shaped in all forms and from all kinds of people, 'why was there to be no service?'

And I, in turn, asked 'why?', 'why did they want a service? They had supermarkets and baubles, they had alcohol and turkey stuffing, why did they want a service when they probably wouldn't even attend?'

And the answer haunts me..... 'I don't go to church, I wouldn't go to church.....but I want to be reminded that there is a meaning, somewhere.....and that someone will be there to remind me, even if I still ignore it. And if the only place I visit during the Christmas season is a shopping mall then that is where Christ must be.'

We had, and continue to have our service.....

'I want to be reminded that there is a meaning.....' That meaning is God and in the birth of Jesus not only is God's love revealed but a way of life is shown to us. A way of life that involves justice and equality, a way of life

that involves humility and mercy, a way of life that involves hope and peace. A way of life that shows others the story of God's faithfulness a story that comes with vulnerability and pain. Not long after the scene of angelic hosts and shepherds gathering around a manger the story confronts us with the harsh reality that many people were not happy about the birth of this child, Jesus. And there was bloodshed. When the powerful Herod didn't get what he desired he resorted to mass execution. The name may have changed but the actions haven't and the horrendous events of 7th October and all that has resulted from subsequent actions means that the words of Jeremiah reverberate down the centuries.

A cry was heard in Ramah –
Weeping and great mourning.
Rachel weeps for her children.....

And Rachel's tears continue to fall and the biblical drama is still going on. The people of Israel-Palestine face intense challenges because of who they are and where they live. And for Christians living there celebrating Christmas this year will inevitably mean sharing not only in the mystery and wonder of Jesus' birth but also in pain and suffering of his death.

The Bethlehem Christmas should remind us all, that people are looking for meaning and as Christians we can make a difference. By living as siblings of Jesus Christ; by listening to each other's needs and concerns and working to understand each other's humanity; by showing solidarity with those who are oppressed; and by sharing the stories of those who have no voice.

May this Christmas be the time that God heals the wounds of division between all peoples, and especially those who live in the Holy Land, and may we play our part.

Hymn: It Came Upon The Midnight Clear (StF 205/H&P 108)

It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth
to touch their harps of gold:
'Peace on the earth, goodwill to men,
from heaven's all-gracious King!'
The world in solemn stillness lay
to hear the angel sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come,

with peaceful wings unfurled;
and still their heavenly music floats,
o'er all the weary world:
above its sad and lowly plains
they bend on hovering wing;
and ever o'er its Babel sounds
the blessed angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the angel strain have rolled
two thousand years of wrong:
and man, at war with man, hears not
the love-song which they bring.
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
and hear the angels sing!

For lo, the days are hastening on,
to prophets shown of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold,
when the new heaven and earth shall own
the Prince of Peace their King,
and all the world repeat the song
which now the angels sing.

Prayer:

In the beginning – you were.
In this moment – you are.
You are strength and weakness.
You are light and glory.
You are God and you welcome us:
you listen for our prayers.....

We pray today for peace, peace in the land of your birth, peace in the dark
places of our world.
We pray for leaders and negotiators, for peace makers and peace keepers,
for all caught up in conflict, violence and fear.
We pray for peace with integrity and with justice.....
God, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

We pray for children everywhere, for the newly born, for those growing up around us, for those growing up in a place where there is poverty and danger. We pray that they may be loved and welcomed and that they may know smiles and hope....

God, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

We pray for all who sit and eat with us today.

We thank you for our families, our friends, for those who love us, for those who share our laughter and pain.

We pray for those who, by choice or circumstance, eat alone.

And we pray for justice for those who are hungry.....

God, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

We pray for all who are sick and for those who care for them and pray for them.

We pray for those who have died, for those we miss at our table.

Tell them how much we love them, we miss them, we carry their stories in our lives.....

God, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

We pray for ourselves, for our needs, our concerns, our hopes and our dreams....

God, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Bright loving God, Emmanuel, God-with-us,

help us to recognise you today

and to welcome you into our lives

in wonder, in truth and in holy joy.

Amen

Hymn: O Come, All Ye Faithful vv 1,2, 5&6 (StF 212/H&P 110)

O come, all ye faithful,

Joyful and triumphant,

O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;

Come and behold him,

Born the King of angels:

O come, let us adore him,

O come, let us adore him,

O come, let us adore him,

Christ the Lord.

God of God,

Light of light,

Lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb;

Very God,

Begotten, not created:

O come, let us adore him.....

Sing, choirs of angels,

Sing in exultation,

Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above:

'Glory to God

In the highest':

O come, let us adore him.....

Yea, Lord we greet thee,

Born this happy morning

Jesus, to thee be glory given:

Word of the Father,

Now in flesh appearing:

O come, let us adore him,

Closing Words:

May the song of the angels,

the joy of the shepherds,

the wonder of the wise men,

and the peace of the newborn king

fill our hearts and homes

this Christmastime and always.

Amen

**Sunday 31st December 2023 – First Sunday of Christmas
New Years Eve**

This service has been compiled by Mrs Sheila Heap

**Wherever you are, welcome to this time of worship.
May you find it to be a time of blessing.**

Call to Worship:

Jesus, you came and you conquered. You were born into the world, recognised by some but denied by many. You grew in wisdom, at one with the Father, your life impacting the world then and now. Journeying to the cross you left footprints for generations to follow – footprints of love, healing and joy. Thank you that as we journey into a new year with hearts open to You, we carry with us Your joy and light. As we walk forward together may we be able to say, ‘I see and hear your wisdom.’

We walk with you, Lord, thanking and praising your holiness. Amen.

Hymn: Hail To The Lord’s Anointed (StF 228)

Hail to the Lord’s Anointed,
Great David’s greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
His reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
To set the captive free,
To take away transgression,
And rule in equity

He comes, with succour speedy,
To those who suffer wrong;
To help the poor and needy.
And bid the weak be strong;
To give them songs for sighing,
Their darkness turn to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying,
Are precious in His sight.

He shall come down like showers
Upon the fruitful earth;

Love, joy, and hope, like flowers,
Spring in His path to birth;
Before Him, on the mountains,
Shall peace the herald go;
And righteousness, in fountains,
From hill to valley flow.

Kings shall fall down before Him,
And gold and incense bring;
All nations shall adore Him,
His praise all people sing;
To Him shall prayer unceasing
And daily vows ascend,
His Kingdom still increasing,
A Kingdom without end.

O'er every foe victorious,
He on His throne shall rest;
From age to age more glorious,
All-blessing and all-blessed.
The tide of time shall never
His covenant remove;
His name shall stand for ever,
His changeless name of Love.

James Montgomery (1771 – 1854)

Prayer:

On the eve of a New Year:

Light of the world,
Shine in our darkness today.

Where there is pain and sorrow may the brilliance of Your love bring joy.

Where there is sickness and suffering, may sunshine come after the storm.

Where there is greed and corruption, may Your radiance scatter the shadows.

Where there is hatred and bitterness, may Your brightness dispel the clouds.

Lord Jesus Christ, light of the world,

Rise again upon us we pray,

And illuminate the darkness of this world through Your life-giving grace.

In Your name we pray. **Amen.**

You may like to join in the Lord's Prayer here... Our Father, who art in heaven ... Amen.

Introduction:

Seeking to fulfil the requirements of the law after the birth of a child, Joseph and Mary go to the Temple. There they encounter two older people who have been anticipating this moment for years, but share disturbing insights into what the future will bring.

Today's Gospel reading is taken from Luke 2:22 – 40 'Jesus Presented in the Temple'

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise Him, He was named Jesus, the name the angel had given Him before He had been conceived. When the time of the purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord; a pair of doves or two young pigeons". Now there was a man called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It has been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ, moved by the Spirit, he went into the Temple courts, when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, Saying:

*"Sovereign Lord, as You have promised,
You now dismiss Your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
Which You have prepared in the sight of all people,
A light for revelation to the Gentiles
And for glory to Your people Israel."*

The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about Him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, His mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce you own heart too."

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the Temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him.

Hymn: Mary and Joseph (StF 229 May also be sung to Bunesan StF136 'Morning has broken')

Mary and Joseph
came to the Temple,
brought the boy Jesus,
offering Him there.
People were waiting
Wanting to greet Him,
Long had they sought Him,
Solace for care.

Anna had prayed there,
Widowed, long waiting;
Worshipped God by
Day and by night.
Now she is praising,
Filled with elation;
Here is God's promise,
Christ is her light.

Simeon sings now
God offers blessing,
Brilliantly gilding
Dawn of His day;
Light in the darkness,
Never extinguished,
Light of all nations,
Light up our way.

Andrew Pratt (b. 1948)

‘THE PRIEST AT THE TEMPLE’

There was something about that couple,
Something that caught my attention the moment I saw them.
Happiness, I suppose it was,
The joy of sharing a new-born baby,
Only it was more than that,
For I’ve seen a multitude of parents over the years,
Each coming bubbling with excitement, skipping with delight,
And yet none that had the look of wide-eyed wonder which they had.
It was as though they thought their child different from any other,
A unique gift from God to be handled with infinite care,
Treasured beyond all price.
Oh, I know all parents feel their baby’s special –
In their eyes the most beautiful thing ever born –
Yet with these two it was more than that.
It was almost as if they were in awe of the child,
Elated yet terrified at the responsibility of parenthood.
You think I’m exaggerating, reading too much into an innocent moment?
Well, possibly.
She was very young after all, and this was their first child –
Everything new, unknown, unexplored.
Yet I still say I’ve never seen a look quite like they had.
Probably it will always remain a mystery,
For though no doubt they’ll come back for the occasional festival or
ceremony,
I’m not sure I’ll recognise them when they do.
Perhaps though, I may find the answer despite that,
For when His mother handed me the child,
And announced His name – Jesus –
She did so as if it should mean something to me,
As if I would understand straightaway why the child was so important,
As if He was a gift not just for *them*,
But to *me*,
To *you*,
And to *everyone*.

Reflection:

Revd. Harry Pritchett tells the story of the worst Christmas Nativity he can ever remember, which took place in his own Church. The youth group was staging a manger scene where Harry was chosen to depict Joseph and his fiancée as Mary. Everyone played their part with seriousness and commitment. The time came for the shepherds to enter as the choir sang ‘While Shepherds Watched Their Flock By Night’. All were suitably dressed in bathrobes and towelled headdress as they proceeded up the altar steps. Joseph and Mary gazed solemnly at the straw in the manger – which contained a naked light bulb shining on the baby. One of the shepherds broke the sacred moment. With his back to the congregation, he piped up in a loud voice: “Well, Jo [Joseph], are you going to pass round the cigars now?” The moment wasn’t simply broken by his quip, it exploded! Mary and Joseph’s cover was completely destroyed as it became impossible to control their burst of laughter. The angel Gabriel, standing on a chair behind them, shook so hard she fell off her chair and rolled over on the floor, holding her stomach. The strains of ‘Silent Night’ and ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ were hardly sufficient to cover the uncontrolled laughter of the main characters. The greatly upset youth leader said: “The only thing that didn’t go to pieces was the light bulb in the manger, it never went out.”

THE LIGHT IN THE MANGER NEVER GOES OUT REGARDLESS OF THE MESS WE MAKE OF THINGS.

That’s a good thought to take with us into a New Year. The light never goes out. The Christ Child, who came into the darkness of the world brought light. His coming changed the world – and is still changing it.

It was the coming of this child that Simeon and Anna had spent a life time longing for. Conditions in Israel at the time of Jesus’ birth were dismal. Israel was occupied by Roman armies, ruled by ruthless King Herod. The Jewish religious leaders were open to questionable influences and had become worldly minded. In the midst of all the darkness and despair God always called some who remained devout followers. Simeon and Anna were two such people who longed for the time when the Messiah would come – and that time had arrived. Simeon sensed a divine impulse to go to the Temple on a specific day and time – the very time that Mary and Joseph arrived with Jesus to fulfil what the Law of the Lord required. Anna was also in the Temple courts at that time, where she spent her days

worshipping God and praying for the redemption of Israel. Like Simeon, she too was of an advanced age, but that did not deter them from watching, waiting and hoping that they would see the promised Messiah. As we read, their longing was rewarded. Age is not a barrier to God's purposes – the Light of Christ shines on. Holy hopes and obedient worship will be honoured.

As we stand on the eve of a new year, what are our hopes and expectations? Are we like Simeon and Anna or are we easily tempted to give up when the going gets hard? We will certainly need the Light of Christ to guide us through all the challenges and changes as they unfold and it will come to us in many different ways – if we are watching and waiting, with an air of expectation. It was on a young girl, a hard working tradesman, rough and ready shepherds and faithful elderly worshippers that the Light first shone - and still shines today.

THE LIGHT IN THE MANGER NEVER GOES OUT REGARDLESS OF THE MESS WE MAKE OF THINGS

Hymn: We See The Eyes of Mary Shine (StF 219 Tune: Truro Singing the Faith 297 'Christ is alive)

We see the eyes of Mary shine,
For all the pain of birth is past.
She cradles Jesus in her arms,
Her time of joy is here at last.

We look on Joseph's roughened hands,
His eyes are filled with tender joy.
He gently reaches for the child,
This little scrap, this baby boy.

And can they know? And could they guess
At love's responsibility,
That hurt would mingle with the joy
Of human possibility?

But on this night a single star
Is just enough to signal grace;
A child is born in Bethlehem
And offered for the human race.

Andrew Pratt (b. 1948)

Prayers of Love and Concern:

Today we honour Simeon and Anna. Old, both, they had a light that sustained them. They both held strongly to what they knew they hoped for. May we – people of all ages – be held together by what sustains us. Whether seven or seventy, may we know what is most important:

God in your mercy, hear us.

Today we honour all shapes of families. Families by choice, families by adoption, families by birth, families in grief, families in multiple homes, families in negotiation, families in care, families in support. In all shapes of family, may we find words of love and kindness:

God in your mercy, hear us.

Today we pray for people who are ignored because of their age. In an era where youth and beauty are praised, we have so often ignored wisdom, experience, longstanding faithfulness and perspective. For all who have felt overlooked, for all who have love and wisdom to share, we pray:

God in your mercy, hear us. Amen.

Hymn: Here On The Threshold (StF 684 Tune: Singing the faith 350 Londonderry Air ‘I cannot tell, why He, whom angels worship’)

Here on the threshold of a new beginning,
By grace forgiven, now we shall leave behind
Our long-repentent selfishness and sinning,
And all our blessings call again to mind:
Christ to redeem us, ransom and restore us,
The love that holds us in a Saviour’s care,
Faith, strong to welcome all that lies before us,
Our unknown future, knowing God is there.

May we, Your children, feel with Christ’s compassion
An earth disordered, hungry and in pain;
Then, at Your calling, find the will to fashion
New ways where freedom, truth and justice reign;
Where wars are ended, ancient wrongs are righted,
And nations value human life and worth;
Where in the darkness lamps of hope are lighted
And Christ is honoured over all the earth.

So may Your wisdom shine from Scripture's pages
To mould and make us stones with which to build
God's holy Temple, through eternal ages,
One Church, united, strong and Spirit-filled;
Heirs to the fullness of Your new creation
In faith, we follow, pledged to be Your own;
Yours is the future, ours the celebration,
For Christ is risen! God is on the throne.

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926)

Blessing:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown".

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way"

So may that light shine in our hearts each and every day. **Amen.**

Our printed services do not include an offering but if you feel you would like to respond to God's love in this way please contact the treasurer of your church or contact the Circuit Office. Thank you.

If you no longer wish to receive this printed sheet, could you let either your Minister or the Circuit Office (tel: 01782 612648 e-mail: northstaffscircuit@hotmail.co.uk) know please, or equally, please let us know if there's someone you know who would like to receive it.