

29th December 2024 – Morning Service

Olwen Meller

Call to Worship

Light looked down and beheld darkness, thither will I go said Light.
Peace looked down and beheld war, thither will I go said Peace.
Love looked down and beheld hatred, thither will I go said Love.
So came Light and shone, so came Peace and gave rest, so came Love and brought life.
And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.

StF 193 – Born in the night

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| 1) Born in the night, Mary's Child,
a long way from your home;
coming in need, Mary's Child,
born in a borrowed room. | 3) Truth of our life, Mary's Child,
you tell us God is good;
prove it is true, Mary's Child,
go to your cross of wood. |
| 2) Clear shining light, Mary's Child,
your face lights up our way;
light of the world, Mary's Child,
dawn on our darkened day. | 4) Hope of the world, Mary's Child,
you're coming soon to reign;
Saviour of all, Mary's Child,
walk in our streets again. |

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Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come before you today to worship you and to say thank you for the many wonderful gifts that you have given to us. We thank you especially for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. We thank you that he was born a baby in Bethlehem and lived and worked among us. Be with us in our worship today. Send your Holy Spirit upon us; draw us into the presence of your love to help us, once again, welcome Jesus into our lives.

We bring before you today all who are sad and lonely. We think of those who have lost loved ones or those who are sick themselves. We lift them up to you in our hearts and we ask that you will be with them.

Some of us carry heavy burdens, others have a lightness of spirit. Some of us are close to God, others cannot see, and yet, whoever we are each one is valuable and precious to you. You give us a place in your story and without us the picture is not complete. We ask that you will be with us in our worship today so that we may feel renewed and refreshed by your Holy Spirit. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 210 – Love came down at Christmas

- 1) Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
star and angels gave the sign.
- 2) Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, Love divine;
worship we our Jesus,
but wherewith for sacred sign?
- 3) Love shall be our token;
love be yours and love be mine;
love to God and all the world,
love for plea and gift and sign.

Christina Georgina Rossetti

Reading: Isaiah 63:7-9

I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us – yes, the many good things he has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me'; and so he became their Saviour. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

First Reflection

Isaiah shows us God's way of being in the world, a way that should be most obvious at Christmas. Isaiah is reminding the people of all that God has done for them throughout the ages but, although he talks in general terms about God's 'praiseworthy acts' and 'great favour' the real cause of joy is not the deeds but the presence of God himself with his people. Isaiah wants his people to remember as though they were there at the time, and this was a formative memory from their childhood, the times that God has been there with them and shown them how much he loved and pitied them. They can almost feel again what it is like to be small enough and trusting enough to be carried on God's shoulders. It is as though God is the father and Israel a child, feeling the magical mixture of excitement and security that riding up so high on a father's shoulders can bring.

That is what God offers his people: his own love and presence, and through all the centuries that follow, when trust proves false, over and over again, God's purpose does not waver and neither does his love. Still God gives himself to his people and willingly risks what follows until we reach the logical conclusion, here at Christmas time, when God becomes a human being, sharing flesh and blood and suffering to be with his people. God made us to share his life but since we are too foolish or too proud to see that, he comes instead and shares ours.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, at your birth the angels sang 'Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth.' Grant that we who have heard the message of the angels and celebrate your birth, may enjoy the peace and unity of your kingdom where you live for ever and ever. **Amen.**

StF 272 – From heaven you came

- 1) 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
- Ch) *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*

2) 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

4) So let us learn how to serve
And in our lives enthrone Him
Each other's needs to prefer
For it is Christ we're serving

3) Come see His hands and His feet
The scars that speak of sacrifice
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered

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Reading: Luke 2:15-21

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

Second Reflection

Imagine the night sky on an evening when the clouds have drifted away. The stars are shining now but there is no moon so the shepherds can hardly see each other and all they can hear of the sheep is their restless breath. Picture these shepherds who have worked under the boundless sky night after night for all of their adult life. Do they take the beauty for granted or does it make them more receptive to awe? Do they dwell on their littleness and insignificance next to the mightiness of the heavens? Are they diminished by its grandeur or does the beauty convince them of the meaning of creation? Gazing on the sky at night can bring such contradictory responses and if you gazed long enough, angels could easily appear.

Think about what this passage teaches us. The glorious moment is not enough. So often we seek for a spiritual 'high' and long for a revelation. Once, maybe twice in a lifetime, we feel as if the veil between heaven and earth has been lifted and there is a temptation to think that this is an end in itself. But after this amazing experience the shepherds were not allowed to go home. They were not allowed to wallow in spiritual success or bathe in the glory of the angels for long. They have been instructed to find this baby, and they obey.

So now they have seen for themselves - but that is not the end of their task either. They continue to 'spread the word'. Only then are they allowed to return to their sheep. They are not the likeliest evangelists - these men who hardly ever appear in the synagogue - but right from the start God is choosing the humble to proclaim his word.

Prayer

Dear Lord, grant me the humility of the shepherds. May I follow their obedience to the angels, and their readiness to spread your word. Give me the energy to get up and go, to leave my work and hurry to your side, and when I return, to glorify and praise you ever after. **Amen**

StF 206 – It was on a starry night

- 1) It was on a starry night
When the hills were bright
Earth lay sleeping, sleeping calm and still
Then in a cattle shed
In a manger bed
A boy was born, King of all the world
- 2) Soon the shepherds came that way
Where the baby lay
And were kneeling, kneeling by His side
And their hearts believed again
For the peace of all
For a boy was born, King of all the world

*Ch) And all the angels sang for Him
The bells of heaven rang for Him
For a boy was born, King of all the world
And all the angels sang for Him
The bells of heaven rang for Him
For a boy was born, King of all the world*

Joy Webb © Salvationist Publishing CCL No. 515642

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written: "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.' After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Third Reflection

I'm sure that from time to time we have all seen the old black and white newsreels showing refugees stumbling bleary eyed from trains in the UK, or landing bewildered from trans-Atlantic ships in New York. In one hand they clutch a battered suitcase and in the other they clasp the hand of their small child. They look around with startled expressions at this foreign country which is reluctantly giving them safety. How difficult for us to understand the devastation they must have felt at losing everything. Nothing was certain in their lives anymore and there was no going back.

Herod asked the wise men to return to him and tell him where the young child was on the pretence of wanting to go and worship him but we are told that they were warned in a dream not to do so and returned home by another route. Joseph was also warned in a dream to leave where they were living and take the family to Egypt for safety from Herod's men, where they stayed until the death of Herod.

Herod's way of bringing about what he longs for is to seize it by force and without any concern for anyone else. Herod wants power, but he can never have enough of it. After all he is already a king! Herod had options. He could, for example, have sought out the child and adopted him, thereby extending his own rule into the next generation. But such a thought never entered his head.

Or he could have calculated his own age and that of the new-born child and reckoned on a good number of years still as king before the child could pose any threat to him. Or he could have looked at the three strange men who came looking for a new 'king' and merely laughed at them.

But because Herod's whole identity is bound up with his need for power, and because he trusts no-one but himself to give him what he wants, he cannot see any of these options. And so he kills - madly and in vain to try to get security for himself. But the story of Herod, like the stories we read day by day in the newspapers, suggests that this tactic simply never works.

Even if we have not been refugees ourselves we may know of them in our neighbourhoods; Iraqis and Afghans today, Ugandans a generation ago. All of us at one time or another will experience the insecurity of ill-health and grief. Just think how at that time your world is turned upside down, and there is no handrail to keep you steady. Even though you keep a roof over your head and food in the fridge, you feel lost, adrift and powerless. If never before, this is the time to put your hand in the hand of God and look to him to show the way.

This reminds us of words written by Minnie Louise Haskins in the last century and used by King George VI in a New Year Message:

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 better to you than a light and safer than a known way.' So I went forth, and finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

Prayer

Dear Father, may I trust in you to uphold me when my world is falling apart, and trust you to defend me when I feel threatened by others, and trust you to protect me when I am all alone; through the love of God which will follow me wherever I am. **Amen**

StF 208 – Let heaven and earth combine

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| 1) Let earth and heaven combine,
angels and men agree,
to praise in songs divine the incarnate Deity,
our God contracted to a span,
incomprehensibly made man. | 4) He deigns in flesh to 'appear,
widest extremes to join;
to bring our vileness near, and make us all divine:
and we the life of God shall know,
for God is manifest below. |
| 2) He laid his glory by, he wrapped him in our clay;
unmarked by human eye,
the latent Godhead lay;
infant of days he here became,
and bore the mild Immanuel's name. | 5) Made perfect first in love, and sanctified by grace,
we shall from earth remove,
and see his glorious face:
then shall his love be fully showed,
and we shall all be lost in God. |
| 3) Unsearchable the love that has the Saviour brought;
the grace is far above both earth and angel's thought:
suffice for us that God, we know,
our God, is manifest below. | |

Charles Wesley

Blessing

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks - then the work of Christmas begins. To find the lost, to feed the hungry, to release the oppressed, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace to all peoples and to make music in the heart. **Amen**