

A Christmas Service – 25th December, 2024 (StF)

Call to Worship: Isaiah chapter 9 verse 2 and 6 to 7

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. 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 and peace 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 forever.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. Amen.

Our opening carol was written by Isaac Watts in 1719. He was a pastor at several independent or Congregational chapels, but is best-known as 'The Father of English Hymnody', because his approximately six hundred hymns gradually replaced metric psalms in church worship. Most of his hymns were written when he was Pastor of Mark Lane Chapel in London. We shall sing number 330, 'Joy to the world, the Lord is come!'

1. 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.

2. Joy to the earth, the Saviour reigns!

Let all their songs employ,

While fields, and floods, rocks, hills, and plains

Repeat the sounding joy,

Repeat the sounding joy,

Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

3. 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.

© Isaac Watts {1674 – 1748}

Let us pray.

Amazing God, we have come to celebrate your boundless, constant love for all humanity on this Christmas Day. You took our mortal flesh and came to us as Jesus, a helpless baby, homeless and born in a stable to ordinary parents in an insignificant town, to experience our lives, to know our happiness and woes, our pleasures and pain, our trials and temptations. You gave him to the world, even though you knew he would be rejected, suffer and die to save us.

Although we often fail to live as you call us to, we ask you to forgive us and transform our lives. Often we crowd Christ out of Christmas because of the pressures and pleasures of the season, so we ask you to help us to make room for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives, for without him we have no hope. We believe that through Jesus alone, we have a fresh start with you, our heavenly Father, freed from the burden of sin.

Therefore, gracious, loving God, as we thank you for all you have done, may we spread the Good News of your Salvation in all that we do and say. Teach us to make time to serve you as you call us to, so that, by helping and loving others in Jesus' lovely name, we may bring you honour, praise and glory. Amen.

We say the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples...

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.

The second carol was written for Christmas Day 1749, as poem / present for eleven-year-old Dolly Byrom. It was written by her father, John Byrom, who invented and taught an early form of shorthand writing. Dolly showed the poem to members of Stockport Parish Church, where the Byroms' worshipped and the organist, John Wainwright, composed a melody for it.

At one minute past midnight on Christmas Day 1750, the Byrom household was roused from sleep by Mr. Wainwright and his choir singing "Christians, awake, salute the happy morn" outside their house. I trust that John Byrom was gracious enough to rise, dress and offer due hospitality to the singers, even though he may well have been exhausted. Moreover, it is as well that John Wainwright found the correct house: otherwise they might have received the contents of a chamber pot for their pains, Christmas Day or not! We sing number 195.

**1. Christians, Awake, salute the happy morn,
Whereon the Saviour of the world was born;
Rise to adore the mystery of love,
Which hosts of angels chanted from above;
With them the joyful tidings first begun
Of God incarnate and the Virgin's Son.**

**2. Then to the watchful shepherds it was told,
Who heard the angelic herald's voice: "Behold,
I bring good tidings of a Saviour's birth
To you and all the nations on the earth:
This day hath God fulfilled his promised word,
This day is born a Saviour, Christ the Lord."**

**3. He spake; and straightway the celestial choir
In hymns of joy, unknown before, conspire.
The praises of redeeming love they sang,
And heaven's whole orb with alleluias rang;
God's highest glory was their anthem still,
Peace on the earth, in every heart goodwill.**

**4. O may we keep and ponder in our mind
God's wondrous love in saving lost mankind;
Trace we the babe, who hath retrieved our loss,
From his poor manger to his bitter cross;
Tread in his steps assisted by his grace,
Till our first heavenly state again takes place.**

**5. Then may we hope, the angelic hosts among,
To sing, redeemed, a glad triumphal song;
He that was born upon this joyful day
Around us all his glory shall display;
Saved by his love, incessant we shall sing
Eternal praise to heaven's Almighty King.** © *John Byrom {1692 – 1763}*

The Gospel reading is John chapter 1 verses 1 to 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of human beings. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all people might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. Amen.
Our next carol was written by Revd. Edward Caswall, who not only left the Church of England to follow John Newman into the Roman Catholic Church, but worked at the Edgbaston Oratory, doing sterling work amongst the sick and poor in Birmingham. We shall sing number 215. 'See, amid the winter's snow'.

**1. See amid the winter's snow,
Born for us on earth below;
See, the tender Lamb appears,
Promised from eternal years: *Chorus:*
*Hail, thou ever-blessed morn,
Hail, redemption's happy dawn!***

*Sing through all Jerusalem,
Christ is born in Bethlehem.*

**2. Lo, within a manger lies
He who built the starry skies;
He, who, throned in heights sublime,
Sits amid the cherubim: *Chorus:***

**3. Say, ye holy shepherds, say,
What your joyful news today?
Wherefore have ye left your sheep
On the lonely mountain steep? *Chorus:***

**4. 'As we watched at dead of night,
There approached a wondrous light;
Angels, singing peace on earth,
Told us of the Saviour's birth.' *Chorus:***

**5. Sacred infant, all divine,
What a tender love was thine,
Thus to come from highest bliss
Down to such a world as this: *Chorus: © Edward Caswall (1814 – 1878)***

Address: “The Light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” John 1:5

Sometimes the world can seem a dark and frightening place: a time when the Media bombards us with woeful tales of cruelty, violence, climate crises, famines, inflation and conflicts. But when Jesus came into our world, life was hard for Jews. After several centuries of foreign rule, Judea was occupied by Rome, which is why Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register with the authorities for tax purposes. Occupied Palestine had its fair share of disease, cruelty, murder and fighting and many Jews despaired that God seemed far away, perhaps that he had abandoned them.

Instead of giving us a nativity story, John got straight to the point: God has sent his only Son into this world of darkness as the true Light who would bring life in all its fullness to us. Jesus left the bliss and glory of heaven and came as a baby, vulnerable and without privilege to share our common lot. He came as proof of God's redemptive love as the Light that guides us to his Father.

There are two main kinds of light: the first is a dazzling light that drives away all darkness from the room; the second is a smaller light that allows us to see what is in the room, but which has shadows and dark corners, too. The dazzling light drives away the darkness and effectively denies the existence of the dark, whilst the smaller light co-exists with it. With a small light, or candle, you can see what you need – a path forward to the door, or to a cupboard or chair, but there are dark corners where you can stay and share the grief and confusion of loss, places where you can mourn and come to terms with your pain until you find enough healing to be able to continue. The small light gives out enough illumination to see hope for the future, to experience God's presence, so you can sit in the shadows and lament until the wounds of loss begin to heal.

On the other hand, the bright, dazzling light denies your loss. It illuminates the whole room, leaving no corner dark, but it is superficial and prevents healing. Sometimes, we

may try to live in that light when we have suffered loss, or are living with depression: consider how many performers have been at their zaniest or funniest shortly before they've experienced a mental breakdown, or taken their own lives. They have been unwilling to face their loss and grief, their sense of worthlessness and despair, so they have denied it – at terrible cost – by living in that dazzling light – like spotlights on stage. However, if that light is extinguished, the wounds of grief are raw and unhealed, so the darkness of loss and depression may become unendurable.

When Jesus was born in that Bethlehem stable, he would have had only a small oil lamp to illuminate the room, yet he became a guiding light for us all. God provides us with a small, sure light to guide us on our way, but which gives us a shadowy space to encounter and come to terms with depression and loss, to find healing and a sure way forward. Nevertheless, that Light – the light of love – has the power to drive away darkness from our lives, for when we love and care for our neighbours, when we support one another, we build up God's kingdom and bring hope, even when bad news darkens our world. Just as burglars shy away from buildings with security lights, so love weakens the power of evil in our world. Christ asks us to share our love with our neighbours, for love begins in our hearts and if we trust in Jesus, love will truly transform our world by overcoming the darkness of hatred. Amen.

On Christmas Eve in 1818, the bellows of the organ at Oberndorf in Austria was damaged by mice, so the priest, Fr. Josef Mohr gave organist Franz Gruber a poem he'd written and asked if he could write a tune for it that could be played on a guitar and sung the following morning by a choir of children. Not only did Herr Gruber do so, but it was heard by the organ-repairers and taken to Germany.

It spread right across Europe and was sung by both British and German German soldiers during the Christmas Truce of 1914. Number 217, 'Silent night, holy night,'

- 1. Silent night! holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
'Round yon virgin mother and Child!
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.**
- 2. Silent night! holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight!
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heav'nly hosts sing Alleluia;
Christ, the Saviour, is born,
Christ, the Saviour, is born.**
- 3. Silent night! holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,**

**Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.**

© *Josef Mohr (1792 – 1848)*

Let us come to God again in prayer.

Most gracious and loving God, on this Holy day, we pray for our world; for peace, harmony, good-health, fulfilment, prosperity and your blessing to be bestowed upon all peoples. Help us to alter the way in which we live, so our hearts are a fitting home for the love of Jesus to dwell.

May you bless the world, by guiding us along the pathway of mercy and justice. We pray for the sick, the poor, homeless, confused and lonely, as well as all who mourn loved ones, all of whose pain is the sharper as they mourn when most people are celebrating. Help us to support those for whom we pray, particularly those who are separated from loved ones. In your mercy, Lord, reach out to comfort and strengthen them with the warm embrace of your love.

We pray for Bridge Court, for everybody who works, lives and visits here, besides our families and friends. May our hearts be filled with the love of our Saviour Jesus, so we may share it with both friends and strangers and may the light of our Saviour shine through our words and deeds, so we honour and glorify you in his beautiful name. Amen.

Our next carol had origins in early Nineteenth Century western England. The author is unknown, but it was published in William Sandys' 'Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern' in 1833. Sadly, it doesn't appear in "Singing the Faith", but it is number 119 in "Hymns and Psalms"!

**1. The first Nowell the angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep,
On a cold winter's night that was so deep. *Chorus*
Noel, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,
*Born is the King of Israel.***

**2. They looked up and saw a star
Shining in the east beyond them far,
And to the earth it gave great light,
And so it continued both day and night. *Chorus***

**3. And by the light of that same star,
Three wise men came from country far;
To seek for a king was their intent,
And to follow the star wherever it went. *Chorus***

**4. This star drew nigh to the north-west,
O'er Bethlehem it took its rest,
And there it did both stop and stay
Right over the place where Jesus lay. *Chorus***

**5. Then entered in, those wise men three,
Full rev'rently upon their knee,
And offered there in his presence,
Their gold, and myrrh, and frankincense. *Chorus***

6. Then let us all with one accord

Sing praises to our heavenly Lord,
That hath made heaven and earth of naught,
And with his blood mankind hath bought. *Chorus*

Our closing carol was written in Latin by James Wade, a member of a colony of exiled Roman Catholics, living in Douai, France at the end of the Seventeenth Century. It was translated by Revd. Frederick Oakeley who was Prebendary of Lichfield Cathedral when he followed John Newman into the Roman Catholic Church. He spent much of his time as a Catholic working among the poor of the districts around Islington, before he ended his days in 1880 as a canon of Westminster Cathedral. We sing all verses of number 212, 'O come, all ye faithful'.

1. 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; *Chorus*
O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord.

2. God of God,
Light of Light,
Lo! he abhors not the Virgin's womb:
Very God,
Begotten, not created; *Chorus*

3. See how the shepherds,
Summoned to his cradle,
Leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;
We too will thither
Bend our joyful footsteps; *Chorus*

4. Sing, choirs of angels,
Sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;
Glory to God
In the highest; *Chorus*

5. Yea, Lord, we greet thee
Born this happy morning,
Jesus, to thee be glory given;
Word of the Father,
Now in flesh appearing. *Chorus*

© Frederick Oakeley (1832 – 1865)

Blessing:

May the joy of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, the worship of the wise men and the peace of the Christ child be yours, this Christmas.

May Christ, who by his incarnation gathered into one all things earthly and all things heavenly, fill you with joy and peace.

And the blessing of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you and remain with you always. Amen.