

Welcome to a joint worship service for Christmas Eve. Although it is morning, this will be a calmer, more reflective Communion service in the spirit of a dark winter evening.

We open with 'Child in the Manger' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niR24bEDI4o>

Opening prayer

At this Christmas time let it be our delight to hear again the message of the angels, and in heart and mind to go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, and the baby lying in a manger. Let us read in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious redemption brought us by this holy Child.

But first, let us pray for the needs of the whole world; for peace on earth and goodwill among all people; for unity within the church and respect and understanding among all faiths.

And let us remember, in Jesus' name, the poor and helpless, the cold, the hungry, and the oppressed; the sick and those who mourn, the lonely and the unloved.

As Jesus was born outside the traditions and morals of his time, so we pray for single mothers; abandoned and abused children and orphans.

As Jesus was homeless, born in the worst place possible, a dark, dirty stable among the animals, so we pray for the homeless.

As Jesus was a refugee fleeing massacre by escaping to Egypt so we pray for refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.

As Jesus was betrayed and falsely accused we pray for political prisoners and journalists. As Jesus was tortured and killed we pray for victims of violence and all those who suffer.

As Jesus rose and lives today we pray for peace throughout the world, the peace of God which resides in all made in God's image, today, tomorrow and forever. Amen

These prayers we humbly offer in the name of Jesus, the Word made flesh, and we say the words he taught us:

LORD'S PRAYER

Hymn In the bleak midwinter (R&S 162) <https://youtu.be/RhaldsE80D4>

In the bleak midwinter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter,
Long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him,
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When he comes to reign;
In the bleak midwinter
A stable place sufficed
The Lord God incarnate,
Jesus Christ.

Enough for him, whom Cherubim
Worship night and day
A breast full of milk
And a manger full of hay.

Enough for him, whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air;
But his mother only,
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

What can I give him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give Him —
Give my heart.

Bible reading: John 1:1-14 Inclusive Bible version

In the beginning there was the Word; the word was in God's presence, and the Word was God. The Word was present to God from the beginning.

Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being.

In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light – a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.

Then came one named John, sent as an envoy from God, who came as a witness to testify about the Light, so that through his testimony everyone might believe. He himself was not the Light; he only came to testify about the Light – the true Light that illumines all humankind.

The Word was coming into the world – was in the world – and though the world was made through the Word the world did not recognize it.

Though the Word came to its own realm, the Word's own people did not accept it.

Yet any who did accept the Word, who believed in that Name, were empowered to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor urge of flesh not human will – but born of God.

And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us; we saw the Word's glory – the favour and position a parent gives an only child – filled with grace, filled with truth.

Reflection

The beginning of John's gospel is my favourite bit of the whole Bible. It IS Christmas. I get goose bumps every time it is read at the end of the service of nine lessons and carols. You may have noticed that I read a different version, without the use of pronouns. I didn't do that to be perverse, or make some point about inclusivity – I actually like the traditional version. But I do want to make a point about perspective. I have a lot of different translations of the Bible, including one in Spanish. In the original Greek, 'word' *logos* is a masculine word, but in Spanish, 'word' *palabra* is a feminine word. And that makes a difference. How would you view the world differently if you read:

'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God... all things were made by her, and without her, nothing was made, and what came into being through her was life and the life (feminine) was the light (feminine) of men, and the light shone in the shadows (feminine) and the shadows did not overcome her'?

Would you think it was a foible of your language, or would you think of the Word as feminine? And if the Word is feminine, how can it be Jesus, which we assume it is? Although this passage from John does not actually spell out that the Word is Jesus – 'a father's only son is a mistranslation of 'only one'. Well, what about the bit where the Word became flesh, you ask? The Spanish version says the Word (feminine) became flesh and made her abode with us and we have seen her glory, the glory received from the Father like the 'only one'.

English is not a language that has masculine and feminine words, so strictly speaking the Word is neither male or female, like God who is genderless, so in English the version I read would be closer to what our language represents, and yet that does not seem to have affected our perception that the Word of John's gospel is Jesus. But it should. In the beginning was the Word and Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word and God are one and the same, together at the beginning of time, and together at the end of time. It is not until the Word is incarnated in the baby Jesus, that it takes on a male body.

So what, you might say. It's just semantics. It's just linguistics. Just the sort of nonsense a minister with a degree in linguistics might come up with! Well, you'd have a point – I am fascinated by languages, but this is a year in which everything we thought we knew and took for granted has been changed or taken away from us. This is a Christmas like no other, and hopefully like no other we'll ever have again in my life-time. So, isn't it a perfect opportunity to turn the Christmas story on its head and look at it from a different angle? I know there is lots of stuff online, on the radio and on TV, trying to make an approximation of a "normal" Christmas, but overall there is a lot less fluff this year. So, do we have a moment to think about the mind-blowing fact that our God came to be a human along side us? Say that to a Muslim or Jew and they will think you really are weird; they cannot get their heads around a God who would come and live as a human. And not only that, but a poor, socially excluded human. A baby – vulnerable, and at that time completely worthless. A baby that struck such fear into the hearts of the powerful, his parents had to run for their lives to escape a massacre; a God who became a man so against the status quo that he was killed. With a bit less shopping and visiting relations will we spare a thought, as we said in our opening prayer, for the people represented by that birth in a stable – the poor, the single mothers, the homeless, the refugees and migrants, the victims of violence.

Will we take a moment to contemplate the mystery of the Word made flesh, whatever the Word really is? And in case anyone is thinking – 'this is cheerful stuff for Christmas Eve' spare a thought for those who won't be having a cheerful Christmas – those who can't be with loved ones, not because of government rules and guidelines but because their loved one is in a hospital bed, struggling to breath, and they are not allowed to visit. And – I'm saving the fun stuff for tomorrow – liturgically the incarnation hasn't happened yet, Mary and Joseph are still knocking on doors, the miracle is still to come, so pause before you pop the Prosecco cork and baste the turkey. The true light is coming into the world, but the world did not know it. Amen

Hymn How far is it to Bethlehem

<https://soundcloud.com/search?q=how%20far%20is%20it%20to%20bethlehem>

How far is it to Bethlehem? Not very far
Shall we find the stable room lit by a star?

Can we see the little Child? Is He within?
I if we lift the wooden latch, may we go in?

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, Christmas Eve 2020

May we stroke the creatures there, ox, ass or sheep?
May we peep like them and see Jesus asleep?

If we touch His tiny hand, will He awake?
Will he know we've come so far just for his sake?

Great kings have precious gifts, and we have naught
Little smiles and little tears are a-all we brought

For all weary children, Mary must weep
Here, on His bed of straw, sleep, children, sleep

God in His mother's arms, babe in the byre
Sleep, as they sleep who find, their heart's desire

Lord's Supper - as you follow at home, please say the words in bold

Thank you, scandalous God, for giving yourself to the world
not in the powerful and the extraordinary, but in weakness and the familiar:
in a baby; in bread and wine.

Thank you for offering, at journey's end, a new beginning;
for setting, in the poverty of a stable, the richest jewel of your love;
for revealing, in a particular place, your light for all nations...

Thank you for bringing us to Bethlehem, House of Bread,
where the empty are filled, and the filled are emptied;
where the poor find riches, and the rich recognise their poverty;
where all who kneel and hold out their hands are unstintingly fed.

Lord God, you come to us in the simplicity of a baby,
yet are greater by far than our imagining.
Lord Christ, you hide your ways from the proud,
yet reveal your truth to those of a childlike spirit;
Lord Spirit, you overthrow the powerful,
yet empower the humble and open of heart. Come to us Lord.

Come to us now in your vulnerable strength
as we remember Jesus, who brought wholeness and life
through his death and resurrection.

On the night before he died, he took bread and wine, blessed them
and gave them to his friends, saying,
this is my body, this is my blood,
eat and drink to remember me.

Come freshly to us, Living God:

Bring in your Kingdom of justice and love, **Your Kingdom come;**

Forgive us, that we may learn to repent, **Your Kingdom come;**

Heal us, that we may be whole in your service, **Your Kingdom come;**

Teach us, that we may be surprised into truth, **Your Kingdom come;**

For you are the God who longs to set us free to love and serve you wholeheartedly.

Your Kingdom come in us, Lord, and transform the world to your praise and glory. Amen

Share bread & wine

Prayer after Communion

May the love that breathes life into all humanity and all of creation

Be born in us today

May the love that brings us healing

Be born in us today

May the love that overcomes hatred

Be born in us today

May the love that forgives and renews

Be born in us today

May the love that brings the blessing of peace

Be born in us today

May that Peace now be the gift we share with each other.

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

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we will see His glory. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

As Jesus was born outside the traditions of his time, so we pray for different families, struggling families and abandoned, lonely and abused children everywhere.

As Jesus was homeless, born in a dark, dirty stable among the animals, so we pray for the homeless.

As Jesus was a refugee fleeing massacre so we pray for refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, especially those in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and the Rohingya in Bangladesh.

As Jesus was betrayed and falsely accused we pray for political prisoners and journalists.

As Jesus was tortured and killed we pray for victims of violence and all those who suffer.

As Jesus rose and lives today we pray for peace throughout the world, the peace of God which resides in all made in God's image, today, tomorrow and forever.

And we pray for all those who have lost loved ones this year, and for all those who will feel most harshly the loneliness and sadness of being separated from their loved ones this Christmas.

In the name of the one who was made flesh and lived among us. **Amen**

We look forward to the darkness of Christmas Eve, listening to carols and perhaps a midnight service, waiting for the coming Light to burst into the darkness of a silent night...

Hymn Silent Night (R&S 147) <https://youtu.be/Q2f1JK0s5E8>

Silent night, holy night
sleeps the world; hid from
sight,
Mary and Joseph in stable
bare
watch o'er the Child beloved
and fair,
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace

Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds first saw the
light,
heard resounding clear and
long,
Far and near the angel song
Christ the Redeemer is
here,
Christ the Redeemer is
here.

Silent night, holy night
Son of God, Oh how bright
love is smiling from your
face
With the dawn of redeeming
grace
Jesus, Lord at your birth
Jesus, Lord at your birth

Blessing

Hold your light out to the world and let people of all nations
feel the warmth of God's love as they encounter the Word made Flesh
through Christ our Lord.

Follow where the Spirit of Hope leads us

Listen, as the Child of Peace cries for us

Rejoice, as the Love of God embraces us

And let us go with Hope, Peace and Love in our hearts

And the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit for ever within us. Amen