

MERRY CHRISTMAS – CHRIST IS BORN, ALLELUIA!

Call to worship (inspired by Psalm 98)

Here today there is love, freely available to all.
Not our human loving, fragile and intermittent,
but God's supreme love.
May a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth,
break forth into joyous songs of praise.

Here today is love, higher than our loftiest hopes,
deeper than the immensities of time and space,
God's inclusive love.
Let the seas roar their praise,
and everything in them.
Let the rivers clap their hands
and the hills sing together their happiness.

The joy of the living Christ Jesus be with you all.
And also with you.

Bruce Prewer

Hymn Good Christians all rejoice R&S 161

Good Christians all, rejoice
with heart, and soul, and voice!
Give good heed to what we say:
Jesus Christ is born today!
Ox and ass before him bow,
and he is in the manger now.
Christ is born today!
Christ is born today!

Good Christians all, rejoice
with heart, and soul, and voice!
Now ye hear of endless bliss,
Jesus Christ was born for this;
He hath opened heaven's door,
and all are blest for evermore.
Christ was born for this!
Christ was born for this!

Good Christians all, rejoice
with heart, and soul, and voice!
Now ye need not fear the grave;
Jesus Christ was born to save,
Calls you one and calls you all,
to gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save!
Christ was born to save!

J.M. Neale

Today we light the Christmas Day candle on the Advent wreath, but we won't sing the candle song today, so we can make way for more Christmas Day carols!

Advent Candle Lighting

As we come to light the Christmas Day candle, we hear from the prophet Isaiah:
"Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" – the Advent God of love.

The fifth candle is lit

As we light our fifth candle, we celebrate the birth of Jesus! At a time when our country is debating immigration policy, we remember Jesus, a refugee child, fleeing to safety. We celebrate Christ who,

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with God's love, welcomed strangers and those had been marginalised. May we live as disciples of the incarnate God, who through our welcome and our love, will build communities of grace for all.

Let us pray

We pray for welcoming, caring and loving communities. May our churches welcome all as Jesus has welcomed us. Help us to work with others in our local community to promote an openness to the stranger. We commit ourselves to 'lift up our voices mightily' to challenge those in our society who are not welcoming of others, and instead to be joyously welcoming to everyone. **Amen**

Hymn Hark the herald angel sing R&S 159

Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn 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 heav'n 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 us 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 Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that we no more may die,
Born to raise the things of earth,
Born to give us second birth.
*Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King!"*

Charles Wesley

Opening Prayers

Holy and mysterious Lover of the world,
let this day be a worthy celebration of the birth of our God's love.
Through the good news of the birth of Christ,
encourage us to put away our worries, and to discard our fears,
that with minds open to your Spirit
we may better love you and more adequately worship your holy name.
Through Christ Jesus, our living brother and Lord. **Amen**

Loving God, help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift
and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings,
and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.
May this Christmas morning make us happy to be your children,
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake. **Amen.**

Gospel reading: John 1:1-14

This Advent, at least in the services I have led, I have tried to focus on the season of Advent rather than jump too soon to celebrating Christmas. Advent is a bit like my childhood Christmases – the art of delayed gratification! I'm sure I have told at least some of you, that before we could open our Christmas presents, we had to go to church, have Christmas lunch, watch the Queen's speech and phone grandma. And then, when we finally got to open our presents, we had to do them one by one, removing the Sellotape very carefully, and folding the paper to be used again the next year. But far from this being some kind of torture, all the anticipation actually made the whole thing better.

Perhaps that is part of what Advent is about – not only to make us reflect on the real meaning of Christmas and the very human stories embedded in it of hardship, rejection, exclusion and inclusion, and when we get to the arrival of the Magi, a massacre of innocents, the flight of refugees and a long exile from home; but to make us appreciate Christmas Day all the more when it comes. Forget the nativity plays, the grumpy innkeepers, child Marys with plastic dolls, and fluffy white angels with wings, the most amazing, miraculous, awesome thing about Christmas is that our God became one of us. Love was born, for every one of us, and in every one of us. So, let us listen to a Christmas story:

In the bleak midwinter, well we don't know if it was winter, but let's say it was, because it is for us, a young couple made a long and torturous journey. They didn't want to make it. They were forced to by the oppressive military regime ruling their country – something illogical and unbelievable about having to complete some census paperwork in the place where their ancestors were from. It didn't make much sense, but then most things the government did, didn't make much sense.

The transport workers were on strike, so they had to walk. They tried to hitch a lift, but no one picked them up; maybe because the girl, a teenager, was clearly heavily pregnant and no truck driver wanted a stranger giving birth in their cab with all the mess and trouble that would cause. The young man did his best to support her, but it was tough.

They planned to stay with some of his cousins. They had vaguely agreed, but now there was no phone signal so they couldn't let them know when they would arrive. And anyway, they didn't know when they would arrive – it was such a long walk. They'd been walking for days already, and camping out, and a few kind people along the way had bought them a hot drink. They'd stopped at a soup kitchen last night and got a proper meal, that had been great. Her ankles were swollen and he could feel his toe sticking through a hole in his sock

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and the rocks on the road beneath as the soles of his boots were so thin. But they had each other, and they were excited about the birth of their first child, well *her* first child. She had been told he would be great, the Son of the Most High, though they weren't completely sure what that meant, and that God would give him the throne of his ancestor David. Being the King's Mother, wouldn't that be a thing after where she'd come from! They were good people, but poor, and not of any importance in their little town of Nazareth. It was a bit of a dump really. The young man did some woodwork, and they got by on that, just about. Finally they arrived at the cousin's house.

'Oh hi, um listen, you took so long, and we hadn't heard from you, so we thought you weren't coming. I'm, we've, um, I'm afraid we've given the spare room to Jimmy and his family, the children are camping out in the living room, so you can't even go on the sofa there.'

'Oh. Sorry, we had no phone signal. We're so exhausted. We've been walking for days, there were no buses. And Mary's due any minute.'

'OK. OK. Look you could stay in the garage. We've already got some heaters in there – the dog has just had puppies and they are all in there. Sorry, mate, that's the best I can do.'

The young couple settled in the garage. They had a blow-up mattress and plenty of blankets, so it was quite cosy and the puppies were super cute. And she gave birth (I'll spare you the gory details, either you know what childbirth is like, or you don't really want to know!) and wrapped him in a second-hand towel, and put him in a cardboard box with the dog blanket and put him next to the mother dog and puppies and the mother dog looked at him with love, and they were all really happy that the birth had gone well and nothing terrible had happened and Mary dozed off for a while.

Then you'll never believe what happened next! No, seriously you won't – they hardly believed it themselves and Mary and Joseph talked about it for years afterwards and every time Jesus had a birthday, they told the story again. Anyway, there was a knocking on the garage door. Joseph didn't want his cousins to wake up, so he went to see what was going on. There was a group of men there – they looked a bit rough, and they didn't smell great either. They said they were shepherds and they had been out in the fields outside town, minding their own business, having a few beers and telling jokes, when this courier guy appeared. They thought, 'great' that will be the ink we ordered for branding the sheep, but he didn't have any packages. He said his name was Malak – clue in the name he said, but they didn't know what he was talking about. He was very to the point and quite scary actually and they wondered what he wanted. He said that the Messiah, a saviour for the people had been born, right here in little old Bethlehem and that they should go and check it

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out for themselves, and then there were like hundreds of voices singing and praising God, and strobe lights and fireworks, it was wild! 'And we hadn't smoked anything dodgy – we promise!' They said.

The guys were so excited, and they'd come all that way and somehow managed to find the couple, and one of them had brought a super soft lambskin for the baby, so they let them in. Mary and Joseph knew about strange messages, so they believed the shepherds. And Joseph snuck inside the house and got them all some hot chocolate and biscuits and Mary thought about all that had happened to her since Gabriel had visited her all those months ago and how amazing it all was, and why had the message come to her, and why had the shepherds got this special message and not someone important? Surely the message should have gone to someone with influence, who would know what was going on if baby Jesus really was the Messiah? But Mary trusted that God knew what God was doing. And the shepherds went back to the fields, and they talked about that night for the rest of their lives – they never got tired of telling the story, because Love was born that night.

In the beginning was Love, and Love was with God, and Love was God. Love was in the beginning with God and all things came into being through love, and without love not one thing came into being. What has come into being through love was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... Love was in the world, and the world came into being through love; yet the world did not know it. Love came to its own and its own people rejected it, they chose selfishness, and greed, and money and things, and Love was sad and decided to come again as a human child – for who cannot love a baby, Love thought? So Love was born among us, took flesh and lived among us, and we have seen Love's glory, the glory of God made human, full of grace, truth and love.

Hymn Love came down at Christmas R&S 614

Love came down at Christmas
Love all lovely love divine;
love was born at Christmas,
star and angels gave the sign

Worship we the Godhead,
love incarnate, love divine;
worship we our Jesus:
but wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token
love be yours and love be mine,
love to God all men,
love for plea and gift and sign

Christina Rossetti

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Prayers of intercession

As we come to our prayer of intercession, I read an extract from the poem *Yesterday's News* by Peter Trow from *Shine on Star of Bethlehem*

'...in Bethlehem few heard angels, for they were busy with other things;
and Jesus from his birth was homeless,
and as a man he depended for shelter on others.
We remember Herod and recall that lies are the weapons of power,
oppression and the death of innocents are part of the story
which we have sanitized into insignificance.

This was yesterday's news.

Here is today's news:

In this world of selfishness and sin of politics and pain
Christ was born. For this world he died on a cross and was raised.

God is with us: In this world we have hope, in this darkness we have light
a love which cannot die and eternal life - Glory to God!

This Christmas, as we remember the birth of Jesus amongst the animals,
we are reminded that hope comes in unexpected ways and in unfamiliar places.
We pray for the work of schools, colleges, teachers, and youth organisations
Wherever the world is in darkness, Lord **Let there be light.**

This Christmas, as we remember the violence with which soldiers came searching for Jesus,
we are reminded that conflicts still have devastating effects on children trapped between
warring sides. We pray for conflict zones, such as Syria, Yemen and Ethiopia and look for peace.
Wherever the world is in darkness, Lord **Let there be light.**

This Christmas, as we remember the flight of Jesus' family to Egypt,
we are reminded of the millions of families who have no shelter and who face eviction from their
homes. We pray for all homeless people wherever they are in the world, and for Syrian refugees,
Palestinian refugees and Afghan refugees.
Wherever the world is in darkness, Lord **Let there be light.**

This Christmas, as we think of Simeon, Zechariah and Elizabeth,
we are reminded of all the elderly who have died with COVID-19 or other causes, those living in
care-homes unable to see or touch their families for months.
We pray for all those who have been touched by COVID again this year, after hoping that the
pandemic was coming to an end – the young who have had their educations and careers damaged,
workers who have lost jobs, hospital staff, all those who have lost loved ones, those whose fragile
mental health has taken a battering, and those who have slipped into food poverty and debt.
Wherever the world is in darkness, Lord **Let there be light.**

This Christmas, as we remember those who went to find Jesus,
we are reminded that we need to make a journey.
We pray for ourselves that as you have come to us,
we may also come to know you,
to know you and to love you more
as we serve other people and reach out to the community around us.

Wherever the world is in darkness, Lord
Let there be your light.

Lord's Prayer

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Hymn Angels from the realms of glory R&S 163

Angels from the realms of glory
Wing your flight o'er all the earth
Ye who sang creation's story
Now proclaim Messiah's birth
Gloria in excelsis deo
Gloria in excelsis deo

Sages, leave your contemplations
Brighter visions beam afar
Seek the great desire of nations
Ye have seen His natal star
Gloria in excelsis deo
Gloria in excelsis deo

Shepherds, in the field abiding
Watching o'er your flocks by night
God with you is now residing
Yonder shines the infant light
Gloria in excelsis deo
Gloria in excelsis deo

Saints, before the altar bending
Watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord, descending
In his temple shall appear
Gloria in excelsis deo
Gloria in excelsis deo

Blessing

Let us go in faith to ponder in our hearts the mystery of this special day.
And may life and love be born within us,
Christ Jesus be seen among us
and joy surround us like the angels' song. **Amen**

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