

Call to Worship (based on Isaiah 9:2)

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.
Come, O Lord, and send us your light.
O come, O come, Immanuel.
Come and bring the light of God.
Come and walk among us.
Be our Saviour and our Friend.
O come, O come, Immanuel.
Come to bring us your peace.

Hymn O Come, all ye faithful (omit last verse) R&S 160

Prayers

URC Prayer Handbook p78 Longing for light

Tonight the impossible is about to happen in a stable.
The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
Those who lived in a land of deep darkness,
on them has the light shined!

This is the evening when creation stood still and held its breath,
for God was doing the most unbelievable, dangerous thing.
This is the evening when God embraced humanity
from the inside, as one of us, from birth to death.

Tonight is born the light and the life of the world, Alleluia!

Bible readings: **Isaiah 9:2-7**
 Luke 2:1-20

Reflection

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” The light was the light and the life of all people, and the light was God made flesh.

Light is essential, and when we are starved of it, we become sad. Many people suffer with low moods in winter because of the lack of sun light, and we all long for the sparkling lights and candles of a winter festival – it is no coincidence that many religions and cultures have festivals of light around this time of year, especially in the Northern hemisphere where the days are so short.

We had a couple of sunny days this week, but mostly it has been cold, cloudy, grey and foggy. We have been shrouded in fog, literally and metaphorically as we wait to see what new restrictions might be imposed, and whether they will come before or after Christmas. Within the fog, the future remains uncertain. Directions and decisions are made cautiously. What can you do within the fog but wait, watch, and listen? What respite do we have but to pray for light to burn off the fog?

Isaiah's prophecy begins with an image of darkness. A nation, its leaders, its people, and its armies have lived in the fog. The feeling that accompanies the coming light is a triumphant shout. Isaiah then describes the feelings of the breaking dawn with images of war victory. Plunder laid before the victor, broken yokes and rods of previous enemies and oppressors, the boots and garments of the casualties burned in a pyre. The initial verses paint a swaggering picture of victory. The war has been won. The conquered have become the conquering. Territory lost has been won back. But then the war song is interrupted by a strange word: child. "For a child has been born for us." Children don't belong in war songs. The darkness is supposed to be lifted by the light of the conquering army. War songs are for courageous heroes who display their strength in battle, not for children.

Yet, in Isaiah's song, the victory is won not by military might. The fog is lifted by the creation of life, not by its destruction. Peace rests on the shoulders of a small child. Authority over the great nation is reserved for a baby born in poverty. On the eve of Christmas, Isaiah's prophecy prepares our imaginations for what has traditionally been a season of inversion – the mighty will be brought low, and the low raised up; the wolf will live peacefully with the lamb and the calf and the lion shall lie down side by side; a baby is born who will be king. Not a mighty, sword-wielding warrior king, but a shepherd king, gently guiding and rescuing the sheep.

To change our practices and our lives, we have to change our expectations. So, Isaiah's prophecy begins the Christmas season by encouraging our imaginations to seek out ways to challenge our expectations. This child being born is helpless, yet all authority rests upon his shoulders. He will uphold justice and righteousness. There will be endless peace. In these words from Isaiah, we get an initial glimpses of what salvation will look like in God's world. It looks like peace. Leaders struggling with geo-political conflict, lack of resources caused by climate change, and an ongoing global pandemic tell us that the security we enjoy is best won through dominance. The world tells us to put our hope in mutually assured destruction; in putting our own needs before those of others. But before the sacrifice of the cross that will come later, God first humbles God's self to become helpless. As an infant, God is dependent, fragile, and needy. God becomes what we are in order that we might become more like God – people who love and share and strive for peace. Unto us a child is born, and he shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace!

Hymn See in yonder manger low R&S 157

Come, Christmas God by Kate McIlhagga

When it's cold and wet
and we long for the light
 come Christmas.

Come to bring warmth and joy
to inn-keepers and travellers
to shepherds and kings;
come to bring hope and peace
to refugees and security forces;
come to comfort the lonely
and wipe the tear from the cheek
of those who are sad.

Immanuel – God with us
let your light shine
into the dark recesses
of our minds and our cities.
Let your warmth
bring forth harvest of joy.
Let your peace
enter the hearts
of those who struggle and plot
for power and advantage over others.

Come, Christmas God
Christ Child of Bethlehem
Spirit of wonder
be born in us and your world
once more
that joy may be shared
peace proclaimed
and love abound.

Hymn to prepare for Communion In the bleak mid-winter R&S 162 OMIT v1

LORD'S SUPPER Candles extinguished

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.

Bridgwater Drive Church, 24 Dec. 2021. Christmas Eve Written service for both churches.

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

Draw near with faith. Be strengthened by the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born in a stable
to be the living bread and died on a cross having poured out his love so we may drink from God's
cup of forgiveness. Eat and drink. Take Jesus into your hearts.

As you take the bread, hold it in prayer and remember how the body of Jesus was born, lived and
was broken for you, and then we will eat together, united in the one body.

As you take the wine, hold it in prayer and remember how Jesus poured out his love for you and
meets your needs when he lives in your heart.

Share bread & wine

Prayer after Communion

Thank you for bread and wine through which we have remembered your life and love. Lord build a
stable in our bodies, place a manger in our hearts and fill it with your love as if it were a new-born
child.

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

Be born in us tonight

May the love that brings us healing

Be born in us tonight

May the love that overcomes hatred

Be born in us tonight

May the love that forgives and renews

Be born in us tonight

May the love that brings the blessing of peace

Be born in us tonight

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.

Candles are lit.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory
Christ is born, hallelujah!

Prayers of intercession

For some people, Christmas goes wrong and we pray for them:
for everyone who is lonely or sad today

Give them your love, O God.

For everyone who won't get a present

Give them your love, O God.

For everyone who couldn't afford to give presents

Give them your love, O God.

For everyone who has rows instead of laughter

Give them your love, O God.

For everyone who is disappointed or jealous

Give them your love, O God.

For everyone who gets too busy or tired to have fun

Give them your love, O God.

For everyone who doesn't know how to give or how to receive happily

Give them your love, O God.

God's light goes on shining in the darkness

And the darkness has never understood it.

God's light goes on shining in the darkness

And the darkness has never put it out.

Generous God, we do not know why you keep on giving to us;
we do not understand your joy.
But give us such pleasure this Christmas
in giving to other people and receiving from them
that we may begin to understand and become more like you, through Jesus Christ.

This Christmas, as we remember the shepherds who went to the stable,
we are reminded that we also 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. **Amen**

Hymn On Christmas night all Christians sing R&S 153

Blessing said together

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

MERRY CHRISTMAS!