

Call to worship (inspired by Psalm 80)

Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel
You lead your people gently and kindly
You sent us your light and your redemption.
Hear us and restore us, Lord God Almighty
Help us to hear you and know you are here
Jesus Christ is our Lord, our light and our joy.
Let us praise and worship God together.

Hymn Hark the glad sound! R&S 137 omit v3

Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long;
let every heart prepare a throne
and every voice a song.

He comes the prisoners to release,
in Satan's bondage held;
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
the wounded soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace,
to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
thy welcome shall proclaim,
and heaven's eternal arches ring,
with thy beloved name.

Philip Doddridge

Light the 4th Advent candle

Sing Like a candle flame Red Folder 59

Children's Time

Gifts

God, whose giving knows no end, help us to be generous in this season of giving to family and friends. Help us also to be generous to those we don't know who need help; generous with our time, our patience and our kindness.

All that we have comes from you and so
we offer the skills that you have graciously given to us;
we offer ourselves in service and praise
and we offer our gifts of money to help bring about your kingdom.

Receive our gifts by your grace and multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

Hymn Who would think R&S 178

Who would think that what was needed
to transform and save the earth
might not be a plan or army,
proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision,
that a child should lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas Day.

Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,
monarchs scorn and angels sing;
such a place as none would reckon
hosts a holy helpless thing;

stabled beasts and passing strangers
watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven
coming here on Christmas Day.

Centuries of skill and science
span the past from which we move,
yet experience questions whether,
with such progress, we improve.
In our search for sense and meaning,
lest our hopes and humour fray,
God surprises earth with heaven
coming here on Christmas Day.

John Bell & Graham Maule

We say the grace as the children leave for SundayClub

Opening Prayer

Most Gracious God we greet you once again in this sacred space.
We have come because we need to be reminded
of your love and your expectations for our living.
We know in our hearts that we need, want and desire your presence in our lives.
So we come in prayer and listen for your Word to speak to our hearts
and reveal again your desires for us.

O Holy God of Promise, we so often place our trust in the things we can see,
and touch, and easily believe.
But you did not ask us to believe what is easy, you have asked us to believe what is true!
Forgive us, Holy One, when we doubt the way you work.
Forgive us when we find it hard to believe an ancient story, or we believe it too easily,
without taking it in.
Forgive us when we question how you chose to enter the world, born as one of us.
Forgive our lack of faith and belief in things which seem so impossible to believe.
Help us to look in faith, open our belief, and set aside our doubts
that you sent your Son, born of a poor, young girl,
the one who has come to set us all free. **Amen**

Hymn What child is this R&S 170

What Child is this, who, laid to rest,
on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
while shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ, the King,
whom shepherds worship and angels sing:
haste, haste to bring Him praise,
the Babe, the son of Mary.

Why lies he in so poor a place,
where ox and ass are feeding?
Come have no fear: for sinners here
the silent Word is pleading.

Nails, spear shall pierce him through,
the cross be borne for me, for you:
hail, hail the Saviour comes,
the Babe, the son of Mary.

So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh,
all tongues and peoples own him.
the King of kings salvation brings;
let every heart enthrone him.
Raise, raise your song on high
while Mary sings a lullaby
joy, joy for Christ is born,
the Babe, the son of Mary.

W.C. Dix

**Bible readings: Isaiah 7:10-16
 Matthew 1:18-25**

I've been hearing a lot about death recently – a friend's mother is dying. Another friend's brother died suddenly. We heard this week of the three children who died having fallen through ice. And an article in the paper talked of a client's relationship with her dying therapist and the therapist's ways to live a good life. And a devotion I read, also spoke of a dying woman who told her visitor to "not get so upset about the small things. Take notice of all that is good" – for the dying know things the rest of us do not – it is our mortality that gives life its reason and awesomeness. Cheerful topic, you might say for the fourth Sunday of Advent, but death is part of life. It is all around us, though we may like to try to ignore that fact. And birth is itself a kind of death. It is death to the safe, warm cocoon of the womb. A violent release from a dark wetness into a cold, bright alarming world of air and gasping for

breath. And it is not without its risks either. We tend to forget, in our world of modern health care, how dangerous an endeavour childbirth is. While looking for some numbers to back that up, I came across a report that found that 229 women died during pregnancy or up to six weeks after in 2018-20. Women living in the most deprived areas were more than twice as likely to die as those in the most affluent parts of the UK, the report found, a disparity that has significantly increased in the last few years. And, every day in the UK around 13 babies die before, during or soon after birth. Yes, that's 13 every day.

It would have been even more dangerous for Mary and Jesus, with no hospital or midwife. No doubt female family members helped Mary, but all the Bible tells us (written by men) is that 'she gave birth to her firstborn son' then cut to shepherds in the fields surrounded by a host of angels. The danger was added to by having no place to stay, by the age and innocence of Mary. We are not told her age, but she was probably around thirteen, still a child. Imagine for a minute what we think of child brides these days? It is a practice we try to prevent, to legislate against, and condemn those countries and cultures that allow it.

Our gospel reading today, tells us Joseph's side of the story. Joseph was an honourable man. He knew he hadn't slept with Mary, so the only logical conclusion was that another man had. She was damaged goods. She would have been viewed with disgust once the community found out – think toxic abuse and shaming on Twitter and Facebook. Joseph too. He thought to get out of the marriage contract quickly and quietly. But he is told in a dream that she has conceived by the Holy Spirit, and he should take her as his wife. He is told to name the child Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. He was to call him Emmanuel – God is with us. This is an incredible story. Regardless of your views on speaking angels, or analysis of dreams. Regardless of our lack of knowledge of the culture and customs of the Middle East in those days and how many babies and mothers died in childbirth, we accept this story as though it were nothing out of the ordinary. Mary says yes to God, and in her Magnificat praises God for looking on her with favour and talks of how God has lifted up the lowly, how God will bring the powerful down and feed the hungry. A teenage girl, the lowest of the low in her society, living under the oppressive regime of an occupying force, unequivocally says yes to God. And Joseph also says yes. He puts aside all his doubts and 'did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.'

Someone in one of the Advent House Groups said we have lost the awe of Christmas, and I think it's true, we have. We listen to these stories and think nothing of them. We sing about little Lord Jesus, meek and mild, no crying he makes, knowing that can't be true. We get swept up by the gift buying and cooking and eating, the carol singing, pantomimes and what's on TV. It's barely a religious festival for Christians anymore, never mind those who

say they have no religious belief. We have made it soft and fluffy and chocolate covered, when it should be risky and compelling and awe inspiring. It should be life changing – that God, the God we believe created all of creation, that made each one of us in God's image, that God should come and live as a human. A mortal. As one who dies. This is the Incarnation. This is what Christmas is about. And so, I'd like to close with some words from a reflection by John Bell given during the Advent Sunday worship on BBC Radio 4. Words which describe the incarnation much better and more poetically than I can, though I have made some minor amendments:

'I want to use the word Incarnation.

But I want to rescue it from a primary association with a babyfest in December. The Incarnation is not confined to Bethlehem. It seems to me that the Incarnation is about a change in the heart of God, no longer to remain removed from the vulnerable world and fallible people brought into being and loved by their Maker. But rather in the midst of their tensions, their mistakes and even their gross iniquities to enter into solidarity with wonderful and fallible humanity.

It's as if God said ...' What if...?'

What if rather than stay within the boundlessness of eternity, I constrain myself within the limitations of time and space?

What if rather than be disembodied I limit myself to the physical form and intellect of a human being,

What if I emerge on earth not as the gifted child of a pedigreed and rich family, but am parented by people who have no status or secure home?

What if rather than be educated in the finest academy, I learn about life through 30 years of anonymity?

What if rather than be inviolable, I make myself vulnerable – to pain, to prejudice, to slander, to disease and to the loss of credibility because of what I say and who I associate with?

What if rather than choose the best graduates from the university, I pick for my companions a random sample of tradesmen, civil servants, and accountants, maybe even some with no specific skills at all and one who might be quite untrustworthy?

What if rather than repeat safe, traditional messages from the pulpit, I talk about the forgotten and uncherished truths about life, faith and divine identity in places where people may be so outraged that they will try to stone me?

What if, should all I say, give and do, to save the world by my life and example, lead to animosity and rejection, rather than a return to the safety of heaven, if I accept the capital

punishment which earth reserves for those whose love, honesty and integrity are too much to bear? And what if, when I'm dead, I don't stay lying down?

In the last week before Christmas, whatever your state of mind or busyness, take time to ponder on how, out of sheer love, Jesus comes among us not to fix everything, but to be in total solidarity with us, and in the messiness of life to show a truer way of being human. For those who follow that way, grief, trouble and pain are not the end, but can be the birth pains of something unspeakably better.

Hymn In the bleak midwinter R&S 162

In the bleak midwinter
frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron,
water like a stone:
snow had fallen,
snow on snow, 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 Almighty,
Jesus Christ.

Enough for him whom cherubim
worship night and day,
a breastful of milk
and a mangerful 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 only his mother,
in her maiden bliss,
worshiped 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.

Christina Rossetti

Lord's Supper

Come follow the light that shines for you and leads you towards a stable with a manger and a child.

Lord, we have followed the light

Come listen for the voice that calls you to find new life in the broken corners of the world.

Lord, we have heard the voice

Come, rich and poor, neighbour or stranger, gather round and share a celebration with the Prince of Peace. **Lord, we have gathered to meet with you.**

Come, like wealthy kings with priceless gifts or poor shepherds with only themselves to bring, for the Spirit has led you to this place where you are offered the promise of new life.

Lord, fill us with new life.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

And also with you.

From being a child in a manger dependent on his mother's milk for food, Jesus grew to be the Living Word made Flesh offering everyone the bread of life. He travelled from the manger to the cross where his body was broken, his love poured out, but God held him like a mother and nursed him back to life. Lord, may we see the guiding light,

May we find you in a stable

May we follow you to the cross.

May we find new life through you.

As we gather round the table to celebrate the beginning of a journey from the manger to the cross and back to life again.

Holy Spirit, come among us and bless this bread and wine as we remember how Christ's body was broken and God's love was poured out for us.

On the night when our Lord Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

So 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. **Share Bread**

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 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. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

Today there is good news for us to behold!

Those who feared that they were worth little to God have found blessing in God's sight.

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.

You came through the willingness of two young people to say yes to you.

In this season of Advent, in the hushed anticipation of your coming, O Lord, remind us that you are always with us. Let us be like Mary and Joseph, emphatic in our 'yes' to your will.

Into our troubles and weaknesses, into the barren places of our souls, Come Lord,

Come among us and make us whole.

Into the war torn and the refugee, into those who live in conflict, Come Lord,

Come among us and make us whole.

Into the homeless and the unemployed, into those who feel abandoned, Come Lord,

Come among us and make us whole.

Into the sick and the disabled, into those undergoing treatment and those who care for them.

Come, Lord **Come among us and make us whole.**

Into the dying and the wisdom they often bring to those around them, into those who anticipate another's death and those who are grieving, Come Lord,

Come among us and make us whole.

Into the poor and the starving, into those who are oppressed or abused, Come Lord

Come among us and make us whole.

Into the lives of loved ones, into those from whom we are estranged, Come Lord,

Come among us and make us whole.

Into our joys and celebrations, into our work and our achievements, Come, Lord

Come among us and make us whole.

In the remaining week before Christmas help us to be patient with our loved ones and find time to reflect on the real meaning of Christmas amidst the business of preparation and gift buying. In our time of joy and plenty, help us to pray for those who have no homes to celebrate in, no festive food to eat, no family or friends to share the holidays with. And guide us to be generous to those who have little or nothing this Christmas. In the name of your Son, who came to live among us, to bring light to the darkness, we pray. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn Tell out my soul R&S 740

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
Tender to me the promise of His Word;
In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of His name!
Make known His might, the deeds His arm has done;
His mercy sure, from age to age the same;
His holy Name, the Lord, the mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of His might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight;
The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of His Word!
Firm is His promise, and His mercy sure.
Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord
To children's children and forevermore!

Timothy Dudley-Smith

Advent Blessing

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