

MERRY CHRISTMAS – CHRIST IS BORN, ALLELUIA!

Call to worship

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

Advent Candles

As we come to light the Christmas Day candle, we hear from the prophet Isaiah:
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...for unto us a child is born.

The fifth candle is lit – *shine on* p65

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**

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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.

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.**

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

I've been thinking a lot about the real or true meaning of Christmas. I suspect it means different things to different people – alongside celebration of the birth of Christ, family is important, food, and gift giving, and all of us will have a favourite bit of Christmas, maybe a

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particular family or personal tradition, which we will talk about a bit later. First, let's explore a little bit what Christmas is. If you do an internet search for 'real Christmas' all you get is adverts and links for real Christmas trees, as opposed to artificial ones! I then tried 'real meaning of Christmas' – the first four hits were books, reflections for Advent and similar, but still nothing about Jesus, the Incarnation, or even the nativity story. The fifth item took me to Wikipedia with the title 'the true meaning of Christmas', which you would think might get me closer to the birth of Christ, but no - the 'true meaning of Christmas' is simply a phrase that began to appear in the mid-19th century when a shift toward a more secular culture resulted in a national backlash (in America). Christians began to see the secularization of the celebration of the birth of Christ and the shift toward Santa Claus and gift exchanging replace the celebration of the advent of Christ and giving to the poor and needy without expectation of receiving anything in return. Christmas shopping began to assume more and more economic importance. Harriet Beecher Stowe an American writer and campaigner for an end to slavery criticized the commercialization of Christmas in her story "Christmas; or, the Good Fairy", written in 1850. An early example using the phrase "the true meaning" is found in The American Magazine in 1889 - "to give up one's very self – to think only of others – how to bring the greatest happiness to others – that is the true meaning of Christmas." The phrase is especially associated with Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol (1843), in which the old miser Ebenezer Scrooge is taught the true meaning of Christmas by three ghostly visitors who review his past and foretell his future.

Did anyone see Miriam's (Margoyles) Dickensian Christmas this week? She is a lifelong fan of Dickens and explored Christmas through the eyes of Dickens and his famous story. She started out by saying she never really liked Christmas – the expense and excess and people going into debt to give people they don't really like, presents they don't really want. As a Jew, she said they didn't really celebrate Christmas, although her mother always hosted a Christmas dinner to which she invited "lonely" people. Miriam said this was rather boring for her – the only child. Even in Victorian times people were complaining that the real meaning of Christmas had been lost and it was becoming too commercial. A Christmas Carol was written partly in response to that, though I was intrigued to learn that the publisher thought it wouldn't sell well, so Dickens had to part fund it, paying for the illustrations himself. Charles Dickens, having grown up poor and starting work at twelve, was always a champion of the poor, especially of children, and his message is that Christmas is less about receiving gifts and having fun yourself, and more about giving to others, particularly the poor and needy. Or as Miriam said at the end of the programme, it's about hope, redemption and being kind.

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For some people, playing games is a part of Christmas, so we're going to play a game now
– Who said that?

Hymn See, in yonder manger low R&S 157 (omit v 3 & 4)

See in yonder manger low,
Born for us on earth below,
See the gentle Lamb appears,
Promised from eternal years.

Lo, within a stable lies
He who built the starry skies,
He who, throned in height sublime,
Sits amid the cherubim.

*Hail the ever-blessed morn;
Hail redemption's happy dawn;
Sing through all Jerusalem:
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"*

Sacred Infant, all divine,
What a tender love was Thine,
Thus to come from highest bliss
Down to such a world as this.

Edward Caswall

If you watch a lot of television, you might think that Christmas is all about eating special food, buying perfume and that Mr Claus (not Santa) doesn't have a sleigh drawn by reindeer, but visits in a driverless Audi. If you were an alien, or even a non-Christian visiting from another country walking around Rayleigh, you might be forgiven for thinking that we worship brightly coloured lights and fir trees. Only the funeral director has a nativity scene in the window. Even here in church, our visible expression of Christmas is trees with lights. Of course, there have been winter festivals around the Winter Solstice for centuries. The Romans had Saturnalia a holiday in honour of the god Saturn, held on 17 December. It was later expanded with festivities running through to 23 December. The festival was celebrated with a sacrifice at the Temple of Saturn and a public banquet, followed by private gift-giving, continual partying, and a carnival atmosphere that overturned Roman social norms - masters provided table service for their slaves as it was seen as a time of liberty for both slaves and freedmen alike. Anyone spot the link to Jesus washing the feet of the disciples? Pagans still celebrate Yule on the day of the Winter Equinox. They celebrate the rebirth of the sun through exchanging gifts, merriment, and deep spiritual reflection. For Pagans, this is a time of new beginnings, rebirth, transformation, getting rid of unwanted habits, and creativity. Not dissimilar to much of Christmas and New Year – except that we celebrate Christ as the light of the world rather than the sun. Since Christmas has been linked to other winter festivals for hundreds of years, we shouldn't be surprised that what we think of as a religious festival, comes with a lot of cultural festivities, much of them in the UK, started by the Victorians, such as card giving and Christmas trees.

Every so often we seem to have a re-set – we think the commercialization has gone too far and we try to get back to what Christmas is really about, but what is that?

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Read Grace Dent.

What are your non-negotiables?

One of my Christmas wishes is that we remember what it is all about. That we spend at least a few minutes thinking about how amazing it is that God came to live among us. Came as a poor, vulnerable baby, born away from home in a borrowed room, who had to go into exile to escape violence, who experienced all the ups and downs of a human life. Let's take time to ponder 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, kinder way of being human.

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

Prayers of intercession

As we come to our prayers 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 Ukraine, Syria and Yemen and look for peace.
Wherever the world is in darkness, Lord **Let there be light.**

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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, flu or other diseases, those living in care-homes and those unable to leave hospital because there is no care for them at home. We pray for doctors, nurses, paramedics and all who work in the NHS, that the new year may bring better working conditions and hope for the future.

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

This Christmas, while we enjoy the warmth of our homes and the warmth of our families, we pray for all those without food, without heat, and those who are spending Christmas alone, or who feel lonely even while surrounded by family.

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

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**