

1st January 2023 – Morning Service

Margaret Bradley

Opening Sentences

In his 1939 Christmas broadcast King George VI quoted these words written by Minnie Louise Hoskins, a retired academic from the London School of Economics: 'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied, "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be better to you than light and safer than any known way." So I went forth and finding the hand of God turned gladly into the night. And he led me towards the hills and the breaking of day.' On the first day of a new year, when much is uncertain, we gather to put our hand into the hand of God as we offer our worship.

StF 67 – This, this is the God we adore

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| 1) This, this is the God we adore,
Our faithful, unchangeable friend,
Whose love is as great as his power,
And neither knows measure nor end: | 2) 'Tis Jesus, the first and the last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
We'll praise him for all that is past,
And trust him for all that's to come. |
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Joseph Hart

Prayer of Adoration

Blessed are you, God of all time. You are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Before anything existed, you were, and through your creative power you brought everything into being. Through the ages you have graced men and women and young people with glimpses of your glory, and that glory was fully manifest in Jesus. In him we see you; God with us. You are with us today, through your Holy Spirit. And at the end of time, you will be there, bringing all things together in accordance with your purpose. You are good, your love is eternal, your faithfulness lasts forever. So we praise and worship you.

Collect for New Year

Eternal God, constant, faithful and unchanging, your goodness and mercy have followed us all the days of our life; grant that as we enter this new year, trusting in your unfailing love, we may serve you with grateful and obedient hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Reading: John 1:1-5,10-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, 'This is the one I spoke about when I said, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."') Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Reflection – Jesus the eternal Word of God

Matthew's Gospel says that Jesus will be called 'Emmanuel', which is Hebrew for 'God with us.' It is a Christian belief that God's Spirit was incarnate in a human being. The Divine became enfleshed in a real man who lived among us. The incorporeal became corporeal. The immaterial became material. Out of sheer love, God took the risk of being caught up in all the confusions and messiness of human life, of becoming vulnerable to prejudice and suffering, in order to change the world for the better.

One of my Christmas traditions is to go to a performance of Handel's 'Messiah'. This inspired work was written partly to combat Deist views that were popular in Handel's day. Deists believe in a Supreme Creator of the world, who set it going, but then left it to get on by itself. 'Messiah' sings of a God who is intimately involved in the world, and with humanity, and who came to us in Jesus.

A Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi were chatting one day about job promotions. The rabbi asked, 'What do you have to look forward to in way of promotion to your job?' 'Well, I'm next in line for the Monsignor's job', replied the priest. 'Yes, and then what?' asked the rabbi. 'Well, next I can become bishop or maybe archbishop', said the priest. 'Yes, and then?' asked the rabbi. The priest got a bit exasperated and replied, 'With some luck and hard work, maybe I can become a cardinal'. 'And then?' asked the rabbi. The priest was getting rather annoyed by this time. 'With lots of luck and hard work, and if I'm in the right place at the right time and play the political game just right, maybe, just maybe, I can get elected Pope.' 'Yes, and then what?' asked the rabbi. 'Good grief!' shouted the priest. 'What do you expect me to become? God?' 'Well,' said the rabbi, 'One of our boys made it!'

Over the years theologians have discussed at what point Jesus became divine. Was it when the church debated the nature of Jesus and formulated a creed at the Council of Nicaea in 325, which declared Jesus to be 'God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father'? Was it after Jesus' death when he was raised and exalted by God? Was it in his ministry? Was it when he was baptised in the River Jordan and God's Spirit came upon him? Or was it at his conception, when the Holy Spirit was said to have played an active part? But the fourth Gospel doesn't proclaim that Jesus became God, rather that God became human. 'In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God and the Word was God.... The Word became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth.' As Christians we believe that at a particular point in human history God embraced the world with a love and grace bigger than we can imagine, acting in and through a real man, Jesus, in a unique way. God came, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, to be in solidarity with us, to share in our pain, anguish and distress and to 'make us all divine'.

StF 208 – Let earth and heaven combine

- 1) Let earth and heaven combine,
Angels and all agree,
To praise in songs divine, the incarnate Deity,
Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.
- 2) He laid his glory by,
He wrapped him in our clay;
Unmarked by human eye, the latent Godhead lay;
Infant of days he here became,
And bore the mild Immanuel's name.
- 3) Unsearchable the love
That has the Saviour brought;
The grace is far above both men or angels' thought:
Suffice for us that God, we know, Our God, is manifest below.
- 4) He deigns in flesh to appear,
Widest extremes to join;
To bring our vileness near, And make us all divine:
And we the life of God shall know,
For God is manifest below.
- 5) Made perfect first in love,
And sanctified by grace,
We shall from earth remove, and see his glorious face
His love shall then be fully showed,
And we shall all be lost in God.

Charles Wesley

Reflection – A time for new starts in personal lives

The beginning of a new year brings optimism and enthusiasm. We look forward to a new beginning and hope that things will improve on last year. We like to forget about daunting memories and make a fresh start. Many people make New Year resolutions. In a Christmas edition of the BBC sitcom *Outnumbered*, 9-year-old Karen made a list of 46 resolutions. Her mum was a bit suspicious when Karen told her that one of them was for her mother to stop nagging, so she asked, 'How many of them are for YOU?' Karen defensively replied, 'Some!' When her mother came to look at the list there were just three for Karen and all the rest were for other people. It's very, very easy to see the faults and weaknesses of others. It's not so easy to amend our own lives. But the good news is, that however bad we've been, God doesn't write us off as being useless. Over Advent many of the churches in our Circuit have been rejoicing that God's love is inclusive and there is room for everyone. God loves us all with a love that will never let us go and offers us a fresh start and a new beginning.

Motivated by the presence of child poverty in his society, the novelist Charles Dickens wrote a story called 'A Christmas Carol' which tells of an elderly, selfish man, called Ebenezer Scrooge, who made a fresh start. Following visits from the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley, and the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come, he was transformed into a new, kinder, gentler man, wanting to do good in the world.

The artist Tracey Emin has spoken of her recent harrowing experience facing death. After being diagnosed with bladder cancer 2½ years ago, she had major surgery where many of her organs were removed and she was fitted with a stoma bag. Although she wasn't expecting to live long, she was given the all-clear in October and they are calling her a miracle woman. In common with others who come face to face with their own mortality and are granted a reprieve, she says that she will never take anything for granted again, that she will try to do her best in life for everything. She says that she feels genuinely happy, for the first time in her life. She feels that the curse she has been living under has been lifted off her, that she has been forgiven and can make a real, true, new beginning. The theological terms that Christians use for this experience are grace, renewal and rebirth. We receive God by grace, by free gift, in person so to speak, because God has chosen to be with us and dwell among us.

StF 553 – I am a new creation

I am a new creation,
No more in condemnation,
Here in the grace of God I stand.
My heart is overflowing,
My love just keeps on growing,
Here in the grace of God I stand.

And I will praise You Lord,
Yes I will praise You Lord
And I will sing of all that You have done.
A joy that knows no limit,
A lightness in my spirit,
Here in the grace of God I stand.

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Prayer

Merciful God, we give you thanks for your patience and forbearance with us over the past year. Help us to see the 'planks' in our own lives rather than worrying about the 'specks' of trivial mistakes in others. Where we've fallen short – forgive us. Where we worry over what is past – release us. We thank you that we are forgiven and free, able to leave our failures and burdens behind and go on into the future. Re-create us, so that, as the year opens out before us, we might know and share your love and find joy and fulfilment in you. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

Reflection – An opportunity to transform society

History has shown that whenever there is a crisis or traumatic event in society when the status quo is disturbed, such as a great plague or a war, real changes take place. Following the Black Death, which claimed the lives of around 40% of the population of Cradley in the 14th century, the feudal system of serfdom broke up, as serfs were released from their obligations to the lord of the manor and became wealthier freemen. The government that was elected after the end of World War Two brought in legislation that benefited people's lives, such as the foundation of a National Health Service, a housing programme, the introduction of pensions and social security. The post-Covid world presents us with new opportunities too. We are now at a crossroads which offers us an opportunity for rebirth and real change.

Over the past two years a spotlight has been shone on the importance of nature and the environment and how our actions are affecting the climate and creating problems for the poorest people in the world; on whose lives and history matters; on the importance of low-paid key workers; on the wide gap between those living in poverty and those who live in comfort and security; on traumatised migrants who seek refuge here because they are not safe in their own country, just as Jesus' family made a long and hazardous journey into Egypt in order to escape from King Herod.

What might our church, our community, our nation, our world, look like in the year ahead, as we re-emerge from the pandemic, as we are reborn? Hopefully, kinder; more generous; less inward-looking; more aware of the needs of those around us; more inclusive of those who are different and more welcoming of those who come here from other countries; less taking people and things for granted; more determined to take seriously the issue of climate change. Tracey Emin said that she was 'on the cusp of something new, there's no more messing around.' May it be so for all of us.

Reading: Revelation 21:1-7

Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.'

Giving thanks

We take time to reflect on the year that has just ended, with its mixture of good things and not so good things, of sweet and of bitter. Think of those things you are most thankful for, new friendships made, new places visited, new things learned. And give thanks that God's presence is eternal. God never leaves us.

Prayers of Intercession

Eternal God, this new year, we express our hopes for the peoples of the world: for release from disease and poverty; for peace; for freedom from oppression; for a more sustainable earth. May these hopes become true in more and more places. This new year, we express our hopes for our own country: as the economic situation impacts upon people across our nation and many face a winter of hardship and cold; as public services come under strain; as businesses are no longer able to trade and as charities falter; as people come here to find refuge. May our leaders embrace the values of your kingdom and may we bear each other's burdens to make it through. This new year, we express our hopes for our families and friends. Loving God, hold the hands of all who are vulnerable and anxious. This new year, we express our hopes for the church. Inspire all followers of Christ to make you their priority, so that you might complete through us that which you have called us to do. Loving God, keep each one of us in your embrace as we journey forward into a new year, but especially any who know they will be facing big changes in their lives. As we face new opportunities and challenges through the ups and downs that lie ahead, help us to hold onto you. In times of joy and delight, may we to remember to give thanks. In of difficulty, when we doubt your presence, help us to find again your grace and that love with which you seek to fill our lives. And may we find support in one another. **Amen.**

StF 476 – One more step

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| 1) One more step along the world I go,
One more step along the world I go;
From the old things to the new
Keep me travelling along with you: | 3) As I travel through the bad and good,
Keep me travelling the way I should;
Where I see no way to go
You'll be telling me the way, I know: |
| <i>Ch) And it's from the old I travel to the new;
Keep me travelling along with you.</i> | 4) Give me courage when the world is rough,
Keep me loving though the world is tough;
Leap and sing in all I do,
Keep me travelling along with you: |
| 2) Round the corners of the world I turn,
More and more about the world I learn;
All the new things that I see
You'll be looking at along with me: | 5) You are older than the world can be,
You are younger than the life in me;
Ever old and ever new,
Keep me travelling along with you: |

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Blessing/Sending out

May God, who is the beginning, be with us. May God, who is at the centre, be our meaning and purpose. May God, who calls us forward, travel with us beyond the known path. **Amen.**
Go out into a new year to love and serve God, in the name of Christ. **Amen.**