

8th January 2023 – Morning Service

There is room for revelation

Colin Russ

Opening words

Simon Peter said, 'Lord, to whom can we go. You have the word of eternal life. You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus answered, 'Blessed are you Simon, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven'.

These words remind us of one of the many times in the bible in which God revealed truths about His love for the whole world and His salvation plan for humanity through an understanding of the promised Messiah fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

StF 330 – Joy to the world

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| 1) Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing. | 3) He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness
And wonders of his love,
And wonders of his love,
And wonders, wonders of his love. |
| 2) Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy. | |

Isaac Watts

Prayer

Almighty God, creator of every good thing and source of light and truth, we bring our worship through the word made flesh whom you gave to live among us. Holy God, beyond our understanding and logic, vast and awesome in creative power yet full of love for all you have made, we bring our thanks and praise for your mercy and grace shown to us and for all the blessings we receive each day. Revealing God, you gave your Son Jesus the Christ so that we might see you in Him and know your saving love reaching out to all people through His life, teaching and ministry in Palestine. We offer gratitude and praise for the depth of your love for humanity made clear as Jesus gave His life for our salvation at Calvary and was gloriously raised to life again with the promise of everlasting life for all who put their trust in Him.

Loving Father we confess that we have sinned, made mistakes and so often have not given you your rightful place at the centre of our lives. In the name of Jesus our saviour, we ask for your forgiveness. As humble shepherds were called to see Jesus by angels, and wise men were led by a star to discover the saviour of the world lying in a makeshift bed, so may we know afresh the reality of your amazing love through the leading of your Holy Spirit to an ever closer relationship with the Christ child of Bethlehem, even Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, **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.**

Reading: Isaiah 60:1 – 6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Reading: Matthew 2:1 – 12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reflection

In this final Advent/Christmas service, it is good to not only celebrate Epiphany but also to understand the reality and importance of divine revelation which God uses to build living relationships with each one of us. It is helpful to look at how events occurred 2000 years ago and to consider how real it can be for us to experience God revealing His love, and His salvation power in our lives. The dictionary says that revelation is the act of making something known. In the context of faith and worship, it is God making known His love for us in Jesus Christ and His ultimate purpose for our lives as part of His plan to save humanity from the powers of evil.

In the OT, God revealed His plans and intentions for Israel through prophets. Some are well known and others less so. There we see the promise of Israel restored and becoming a beacon of light to the whole world. We also see the promise of a Messiah and one who would be a forerunner to prepare the people for His coming, fulfilled through the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus.

In the events of Christ's coming, the angel Gabriel tells a very young woman that she will give birth to God's son. A concerned fiancé, Joseph, has a vision in which he is told not to worry but to go ahead with his plan to marry Mary because the child she is carrying has been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is told to name the child Jesus because He will save people from their sin, and will also be known as Emmanuel meaning 'God is with us'. When Christ was born, angels told humble shepherds, cold and weary doing their job, that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem and shows how God sends great news to lowly, ordinary people in amazing circumstances. Simeon felt compelled to go to the temple as Mary and Joseph took their baby son in obedience to the law's requirement and he knew through the experience that he had seen the saviour of the world and the 'glory of Israel', the Messiah he had been waiting to see. Educated men, astrologers, followed a new star for 2 years across 700 miles to pay homage to the one they believed to be a new king of the Jews. This belief arose out of their study of stars and planets, and interpretation of what the new star represented. They ignored and tricked Herod, having been warned in a vision of his real intent and threat to the child. An angel told Joseph to escape with Mary and the baby to safety in Egypt because of what Herod planned to do to try and protect his status as king in Judea.

In the first Christmas account we find a whole range of divine interventions which led a variety of people to be part of an amazing event. I wonder if we recognise the interventions as the work of the Holy Spirit, rather than a series of random happenings?

StF 224 – As with gladness

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| 1) As with gladness men of old
Did the guiding star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light,
Leading onward, beaming bright,
So, most gracious Lord, may we
Evermore be led to thee. | 4) Holy Jesus, every day
Keep us in the narrow way;
And, when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds thy glory hide. |
| 2) As with joyful steps they sped,
Saviour, to thy lowly bed,
There to bend the knee before
Thee, whom heaven and earth adore,
So may we with willing feet
Ever seek thy mercy-seat. | 5) In the heavenly country bright
Need they no created light;
Thou its light, its joy, its crown,
Thou its sun which goes not down;
There for ever may we sing
Alleluias to our King. |
| 3) As they offered gifts most rare
At thy cradle rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy,
Pure, and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to thee, our heavenly King. | |

William Chatterton Dix

Reflection

In reflecting on the events surrounding Jesus' birth, we face the question of how God reveals His purpose and intentions to a needy world today. It seems that He can do this in a number of ways.

God speaks through His word in the bible and through prophecy, both OT and NT, because the good news which Jesus brought promises a relationship with God here and now as well as the ultimate consummation of His eternal kingdom and everlasting life to all who trust Christ for salvation and commit to following the way He taught and showed us. The revelation to John in the last NT book gives a vision of how the future eternal kingdom might be structured.

God speaks through education and science. The men from the east were the educated elite of their day and through their knowledge they came to a conclusion which drove them to such arduous lengths to confirm it. A wayside pulpit notice in Sidmouth stated that 'every time science opens a door of understanding, God is there standing behind it'.

God reveals truth through our interactions with other people whose words and wisdom sometimes are the catalyst to inspire and guide us.

God reveals His truth through the words of the bible and challenges us through our consciences as to what that truth may mean as we reflect and consider its impact upon us and how we will respond.

God speaks through circumstances and experiences which shape our lives and guide our actions.

God speaks through amazing times of enlightenment and understanding which take us beyond what we might consider as 'normal' human experience, but are nevertheless very real and blessed moments for the people involved.

What do we make of all this? Do we see the Holy Spirit at work in and through a variety of events or do we simply write them off as random life experiences?

StF 232 – Through long years of watchful waiting

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| 1) Through long years of watchful waiting
Simeon's deep devotion shone:
Gratefully the child he cradles,
Humbly holds God's Holy One;
Rests content in life's quiet evening,
Now his Temple task is done. | 4) As the end of Christ's obedience
On that towering cross appears:
Mary watches with the women
As the soldiers swing their spears;
Simeon's word she recollected,
And her love dissolved in tears. |
| 2) So God's age-long word of promise
In that place is realised;
His salvation now embodied
As a helpless infant cried;
Hearing Simeon's pointed blessing
Mary's heart is crucified. | 5) In Christ's death outside the city
God's own heart is pierced with pain:
In this world's unending conflict,
Seeds of hope on earth remain;
In the light of patient servants
Christ's self-giving lives again. |
| 3) In the following years she watched him
As he pondered God's intent;
In that teeming crowd she lost him,
As his searching way he went;
In her grief, the son she mothered
For the whole world's need was spent. | |

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Reflection

There are many examples through the years in which God has spoken to or revealed Himself to people or communities in powerful and transforming ways. Think of a time when perhaps you experienced a moment of enlightenment or challenge and realised that God was speaking to you. What did you feel at the time, and what was your response to what you had understood from the experience? (Take a minute for quiet reflection.)

Paul's life was turned around completely as a result of his experience on the way to Damascus and the visit of Ananias to help him understand the meaning of it all. Ananias went to Paul, with fear and apprehension, because God had spoken to him in a vision. John Wesley, the son of an Anglican vicar, became a vicar himself and even went to America as a missionary. Yet it wasn't until 24 May 1738 when he was led to the meeting place in Aldersgate Street that he came to terms with the fact of Jesus as his saviour. As he wrote, 'his heart was strangely warmed' in that experience, and his life and purpose was changed because of it.

My faith in Jesus stemmed from a visit to the Majestic cinema with the Boy's Brigade to see a Billy Graham film, *Souls in Conflict*. That experience and the words of a vicar at the end of the film challenged me and resulted in my commitment to follow Jesus some 3 years later. Some time later God called again, this time to train as a preacher. His call came through the challenge and encouragement of other people, Rev. Tom Soulsby in particular.

On May 29 2022 our family life was devastated by the sudden and unexpected death of our beloved son in law, Keith. A few days later I remember waking at 4-15am. Dawn had broken and daylight had appeared. It was an eerie moment with an amazing sense of God's presence in the bedroom reassuring me that the darkness of our experience would pass and light would return. As I lay reflecting on how well our daughter and granddaughter seemed to be coping with the sadness, I heard God say very clearly, 'You asked me to look after them and help them, what did you expect?' It was a moment in which the reality of our loving Heavenly Father's presence was brought home to me, a moment of blessed reassurance and support at a time of deep sadness and loss.

My conviction is that God in Jesus Christ is always ready to 'make something known to us'. What we need is to cultivate open hearts and minds which allow His spirit to speak in whatever way He chooses. The challenge is to be alert and ready to listen for what God longs for us to know afresh and to allow that new understanding to take shape and be effective in our lives of caring and service. The Christmas account is a catalogue of revelation experiences. God still speaks to people today, sometimes making the ordinary a place of divine encounter. He continues to reveal His truth and love in Christ through the ongoing activity of the Spirit speaking for example in dreams, planting thoughts in minds, conversations with other people, life events and through the bible. God is speaking. Are we listening?

StF 560 – My eyes be open to your presence

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| 1) My eyes be open to
your presence,
My ears to hear your call.
My heart be open to your love
And in your arms to fall.
My mind be open to your word,
My soul to heaven's cure,
That I be open to you, Lord,
This day and evermore. | 2) My life be open to your leading
My hands to do your will.
My lips be open in your praise
And for your truth to tell.
My home be open in your name
For weary ones and poor,
That I be open to you, Lord,
This day and evermore. | 3) My door be open to the other
Wherever we may meet.
My arms be open to the one
In whom I am complete.
My self be open to your world
And in it see your face,
That I be open to you, Lord,
Held fast in your embrace. |
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Prayer

Loving God, help us to listen to your voice and to allow your Spirit to guide us. Bless us with a sense of purpose and help us to do your bidding. Grant us the strength and obedience to serve you as we serve other people. Guide us and reveal your purpose for our lives as you lead us along your chosen way. Plant the Spirit of your Son in our longing hearts, so that governed by your love we may faithfully walk with you through each new day.

Compassionate God of grace, hear us as we pray for the world you created. We continue to pray for peace with justice in Ukraine and protection for its people. Bless and comfort all who grieve the loss of loved ones, help those who have suffered injury and support the people who have lost so much. Lord, stay the hand of the aggressor and transform hearts by an understanding of your love and forgiveness. Loving God we pray for an end to this evil and unjust war so that the two countries can once again live in harmony as good neighbours.

We pray too for our own country and for wisdom for those in government and positions of leadership. Help them together to seek solutions to end current problems and to create a platform of trust in order to build a better future for everyone in our communities. In these difficult times we pray for the determination to love you and to love our neighbours in a way which protects the most vulnerable and support those in greatest need.

Loving Father God, we bring to you those we know who need to feel your love and support at this time (pause and reflect). We pray for your blessing to be upon them and for your shalom blanket to enfold them, such a precious gift which you alone are able to give. Lord, in your mercy hear our prayers as we turn to you through Jesus Christ your Son, **Amen.**

StF 400 – Word of God

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| 1) Wind of God, dynamic Spirit,
Breathe upon our hearts today;
That we may your power inherit,
Hear us, Spirit, as we pray:
Fill the vacuum that enslaves us -
Emptiness of heart and soul;
And, through Jesus Christ who saves us,
Give us life and make us whole. | 3) Fire of God, volcanic Spirit,
Burn within our hearts today;
Cleanse our sin - may we exhibit
Holiness in every way:
Purge the squalidness that shames us,
Soils the body, taints the soul;
And through Jesus Christ who claims us,
Purify us, make us whole. |
| 2) Voice of God, prophetic Spirit,
Speak to every heart today
To encourage or prohibit,
Urging action or delay:
Clear the vagueness which impedes us -
Come, enlighten mind and soul;
And, through Jesus Christ who leads us,
Teach the truth that makes us whole. | |

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Blessing

Revealing God, open our eyes to see your purpose for our lives, grant us the courage to follow where you lead and by the power of our risen Saviour enable us to faithfully serve you in our families and communities, and may we know the peace and blessing of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be always with us, **Amen.**