

The authoress of our opening hymn, Christina Rossetti, also wrote ‘In the bleak midwinter’, but she was very unlucky in love. She was engaged to a Pre-Raphaelite artist, James Collinson, but ended her engagement shortly before they were to marry, because he would not leave the Roman Catholic Church and become an Anglican. Later, she ended her engagement to another man when she found he was a bigamist! We shall sing hymn number 210, ‘Love came down at Christmas’

1. Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.

2. Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, love divine;
Worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign.

3. Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all the world,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

© Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830 – 1894)

Call to Worship: Isaiah chapter 9 verse 2

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. Amen.

Our next carol was written by a remarkable man, James Montgomery, whose statue still stands in Sheffield, where he spent most of his life as a radical newspaper editor and proprietor, changing the paper’s name from “The Sheffield Register” to “The Sheffield Iris” His newspaper constantly supported the downtrodden and exploited, opposed slavery, poor sanitation, bad housing, the use of boy chimney sweeps and State Lotteries, but supported the teaching of reading and writing in Sunday Schools (State education did not exist until 1871).

“Angels from the realms of Glory” was first printed in 1816 in “The Sheffield Iris”, entitled ‘Nativity’. It is sung to ‘Iris’ a Flemish melody arranged by Martin Shaw and echoing the name of James’ newspaper. We shall sing, hymn number 190, ‘Angels from the realms of glory,’

1. Angels, from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o’er all the earth;
You who sang creation’s story,
Now proclaim Messiah’s birth; *Chorus:*

Come and worship,

Christ, the newborn King.

Come and worship,

Worship Christ, the newborn King.

2. Shepherds, in the field abiding,

**Watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing,
Yonder shines the infant Light; *Chorus:***

**3. Sages, leave your contemplations,
Brighter visions beam afar;
Seek the great Desire of nations;
You have seen his natal star; *Chorus:***

**4. Saints, before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord, descending
In his temple shall appear; *Chorus:***

**5. Though an infant now we view him,
He shall fill his Father's throne,
Gather all the nations to him;
Every knee then shall bow down; *Chorus:***

© James Montgomery (1771 – 1854)

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we have come to worship you at the end of a dramatic year, with all the opportunities and challenges of 2026 ahead of us. Some of these may excite us, or make us afraid or sad. Help us to travel in faith and hope as we remember that you are loving and faithful, always here with us as we face the future. We surely know you love us, for you entered our world as a helpless child, Jesus, who was born without status or wealth. His birth in the stable of an inn, at humble Bethlehem, to ordinary parents, shows clearly your concern for ordinary people, not just an exclusive minority.

As Jesus grew among us, he shared our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears, our trials and temptations showing us how you want us to live. By his death and resurrection Jesus conquered sin and death, offering us all everlasting life through faith in him. Therefore, Lord, may we pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your word attentively, for you are our Lord and God and you alone are worthy of all honour, glory, power and praise.

Faithful, loving God accept our thanks for this beautiful world and for all the good things we enjoy, for all that you have done for us and given us, for opportunities and experiences that have enriched our lives, for people who have loved, guided and inspired us. Thank you for coming as Christ Jesus our Saviour and friend, so we may travel through life with him as our strength and stay.

Merciful Lord, forgive us when we sin against you and our neighbours in our thoughts, words and deeds, for Jesus has taught us how we ought to live. Help us to change our ways, so our hearts are warm and welcoming with the love you give us so abundantly. Make our hearts fitting places in which Christ Jesus may dwell.

Heavenly Father, you hear and answer our prayers and we believe you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow you once more. May we may serve you and our neighbours faithfully and warm-heartedly from now onward, living out the gospel message in all we say and do, and bringing the gospel light to a world darkened by sin and selfishness. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Revd. Clare Stainsby, a Methodist Minister and former music teacher. It observes the significance of Christ's birth that goes far beyond all the Christmas festivities. Hymn number 192, 'Beneath the paper wrappings,'

Beneath the paper wrappings, there's an open stable door,
beneath the fir tree trappings, there's a welcome and there's more.
Beyond the tinsel fairy is a presence that's divine,
there's a child to change the future, turning water into wine.

*Look inside, look above, look beyond and see the love,
look inside and you will see.*

*Look inside, look below, look beyond, and you will know,
the one who came to give his life for you and me.*

The miracle of childbirth now reveals God's only Son,
a miracle beginning that continues on and on.

The stable holds the echo of the tomb that's yet to be,
on the manger lies the shadow of the cross he's yet to see.

*Look inside, look above, look beyond and see the love,
look inside and you will see.*

*Look inside, look below, look beyond, and you will know,
the one who came to give his life for you and me.*

© Clare Stainsby (born 1959)

We shall say 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.

Revd. George Stringer Rowe, was born at Margate in 1830, and educated for the Wesleyan Ministry at Didsbury College. He entered Ministry in 1853, and in 1888 he was appointed to the chair of Pastoral Theology in Headingley College, Leeds. For some unknown reason this carol is rarely sung beyond Methodism. We shall sing hymn number 196, 'Cradled in a manger, meanly'.

1. Cradled in a manger, meanly
Laid the Son of Man his head;
Sleeping his first earthly slumber
Where the oxen had been fed.
Happy were those shepherds listening
To the holy angel's word;
Happy they within that stable,
Worshipping their infant Lord.

2. Happy all who hear the message
Of his coming from above;
Happier still who hail his coming,
And with praises greet his love.
Blessed Saviour, Christ most holy,
In a manger thou didst rest;
Canst thou stoop again, yet lower,
And abide within my breast?

3. Evil things are there before thee;
In the heart, where they have fed,

Wilt thou pitifully enter,
Son of Man, and lay thy head?
Enter then, O Christ most holy;
Make a Christmas in my heart;
Make a heaven of my manger;
It is heaven where thou art.

4. And to those who never listened
To the message of thy birth,
Who have winter, but no Christmas
Bringing them thy peace on earth;
Send to these the joyful tidings;
By all people, in each home,
Be there heard the Christmas anthem:
Praise to God, the Christ has come!

© George Stringer Rowe (1830 – 1913)

We come now to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Almighty God, Christ Jesus your Son came as Light for our broken and sin-darkened world, for which we pray now. Although we offer ourselves to play what part we can to help people who are in need, or distress, we know how limited our powers are, so we turn to you, our gracious heavenly Father, to whom nothing is impossible.

Help us to play our part, however large or small it may be, to build your kingdom by our discipleship. May we faithfully answer our call to serve you and reach out to support our community and people further afield. Bless our church, churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Unite us in love and service, so we may proclaim good news in words and actions.

Bless the work done by organizations like food banks, street pastors and the Salvation Army who serve the poor and vulnerable in our society and also Christian Aid, All We Can and other relief organizations who address the grievous poverty in the Developing World, besides countries left stricken by natural disasters.

Lord, hear our prayer for blessing on all who are in hospital over Christmas and the New Year and for the doctors and nurses who care for them. May your healing hand rest upon them and fill them with your peace.

Jesus came to bring healing and comfort to the marginalised and ill whom he met, so we pray for healing of everybody we know who is sick in body, mind or spirit. Grant them wellbeing, hope and peace not only through the professional care and support they are given, but by feeling your presence during their time of need.

We know this time of year is especially difficult for many who have been bereaved, for seeing others' celebrations exacerbates their grief and loss. It is a painful time, too for the lonely, for the estranged and for those who feel undervalued or unloved. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us, so we can befriend and support them. In a period of silence, we pray for everyone who needs your help at this time Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so they experience comfort, hope and peace.

The infant Jesus was forced to escape Herod's wrath by fleeing to Egypt, so we pray for the victims of war and man's inhumanity to man. We pray for peace in the many lands where fighting mars the lives of ordinary people, or where people flee from terrorism, oppression and cruelty. Guide the leaders of the world to seek justice and mercy in their dealings and to reject the temptation to use force in order to impose their will on others.

Abba, Father, bless us, our families and friends as we answer our call to serve you. May the Holy Spirit make a Christmas in our hearts every day, not just one day each year. May our joy of knowing how dearly you love us inspire us to let the light of your love shine through everything we do, so we honour you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Shirley Erena Murray was a New Zealand hymn writer whose hymns have been translated into numerous languages and are represented in more than 140 hymn collections. She was raised a Methodist and worked as a teacher, parliamentary researcher and producer of radio hymn programmes. After her marriage to Revd. John Murray, they settled at a Presbyterian church in Wellington, New Zealand.

Shirley began writing hymns in the 1970s and often employed Maori terms and inclusive language. She was appointed a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in the 2001 Queen's Birthday Honours and several feature in "Singing the Faith". Hymn number 194, 'Child of joy and peace,'

**1. Child of joy and peace,
born to every race –
by your star, the wise will know you,
East and West their homage show you,
look into your face,
child of joy and peace.**

**2. Born among the poor
on a stable floor,
cold and raw, you know our hunger,
weep our tears and cry our anger –
yet you tell us more,
born among the poor:**

**3. Every child needs bread
till the world is fed;
you give bread, your hands enable
all to gather round one table –
Christmas must be shared,
every child needs bread.**

**4. Son of poverty,
shame us till we see
self-concerned, how we deny you,
by our greed we crucify you
on a Christmas tree,
Son of poverty.**

© Shirley Erena Murray (born 1931)

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 2 verses 13 to 23

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and

under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,

“Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.” Amen.

Our next carol was written in a Fifteenth Century Trier manuscript. was translated by Percy Dearmer for “The Oxford Book of Carols”, 1928. Revd. Dearmer jointly edited the 1906 “English Hymnal”, “Songs of Praise” in 1925 and “The Oxford Book of Carols”. Percy Dearmer, with Ralph Vaughan Williams and Martin Shaw produced “Songs of Praise” in 1926, a hymnal much used in schools, so he made quite a contribution to English hymnody! Number 218, ‘Unto us a boy is born’.

1. Unto us a boy is born!

King of all creation;

Came he to a world forlorn,

The Lord of ev’ry nation, / The Lord of ev’ry nation.

2. Cradled in a stall was he,

Watched by cows and asses;

But the very beasts could see

That he the world surpasses,

That he the world surpasses.

3. Then the fearful Herod cried,

‘Pow’r is mine in Jewry!’

So the blameless children died –

The victims of his fury, / The victims of his fury.

4. Now may Mary’s Son, who came

Long ago to love us,

Lead us all with hearts aflame

Unto the joys above us, / Unto the joys above us!

5. Omega and alpha he!

Let the organ thunder,

While the choir with peals of glee

Shall rend the air asunder,

Shall rend the air asunder.

© C15th Latin – Tr. Percy Dearmer {1867 – 1936}

Address: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Matthew 2: 15

In Matthew’s nativity account there is a very dark incident, the Massacre of the Innocents, which followed the visit by Magi from the east. There is no record of the massacre, even from Josephus, the master historian of Jews at the time. However, it was a distinct possibility that King Herod Antipas may have committed such an outrage, for he was unpredictable and increasingly paranoid throughout his reign. Herod had

several relatives executed, including his wife, Mariamne and three sons, so he was not a man to be crossed and the slaughter of infant rivals would not have concerned him. Even if Josephus had proof of the massacre, he'd have probably kept quiet about it for his own self-preservation.

In the event, Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled into Egypt, outside Herod Antipas' jurisdiction and remained as refugees until news of Herod's death reached them, after which the family returned, not to Judea where Archelaus was ruling, but back to Nazareth in Galilee which was governed by Philip, from which they had come before Jesus' birth. This also fulfilled a prophecy that the Messiah would be a Nazarene.

What does this reading mean to us two thousand years later? To begin with God did not only plan that his Son should be Immanuel – God with us and among us – sharing the lives of ordinary people without rank, wealth or privilege, but he would know what it is to be a refugee, relying on the hospitality of strangers and having to rebuild broken lives. Jesus came for everybody, whatever their state, not solely for an exclusive elite, yet from his infancy, our Lord faced hatred and danger from powerful people.

It remains a stain on humanity that children are still suffering at the hands, or commands, of powerful leaders, whether it is in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar or the Holy Land. I'm sure I'm not alone when I am roused to helpless fury at the sight of babes and infants being dragged from wrecked buildings, or mutilated and maimed by the indiscriminating machinery of war. I find it particularly galling to see the suffering of Palestinian children in Gaza and to recall the number of Israeli children who were cruelly massacred by Hamas three years ago. **"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."**

Indeed, often I baulk at the term '**Holy Land**', because what has been happening there makes it a misnomer. Only last week, I answered an appeal by the DEC to help Gazans cope with flooding and the lack of suitable shelters and clothing. In his hymn, '**Who would think that what was needed**', John Bell wrote, '**Centuries of skill and science Span the past from which we move, Yet experience questions whether, With such progress, we improve**'. It remains an open question to me, but yet with Jesus hopes remains. For all the gloomy news with which we are bombarded, an army of relief workers, medical professionals and charities is striving to help the victims of war, whilst diplomats are trying to negotiate an end to conflicts.

We may ask what we can do to protect the vulnerable. Well, we can ensure that our safeguarding procedures are followed – for everybody, not only young people. We can lobby for more to be done to stamp out grooming gangs and modern-day slavery, and we can try to persuade our Government to ensure that the Home Office speedily differentiates between genuine refugees and economic migrants, rather than having processing taking several years. Let us not forget that Jesus and his parents were refugees who were given sanctuary until their danger had passed. Moreover, **Leviticus chapter 19 verses 33 and 34** has this command: '**When an alien lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat them. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.**' That rule still applies which makes it all the more important for our authorities to determine who has a genuine need and who does not, so the others can be returned whence they came and pressures on our welfare system be eased.

God's care extends to all – even to unreliable shepherds and star-gazing Gentiles; he cares so much he sent Jesus as a helpless child, without privileges or protection, to a world where people sought his life. **Friends, as we begin a New Year,**

let's face it in faith and obedience, caring for all, especially the vulnerable, confident that God who gave his Son for us won't let us down. May we remain determined to do his will, to play our part in his kingdom's work. Amen.

Geoffrey Ainger was a Methodist minister. During a varied ministry, he spent nine years as part of a team ministry at Notting Hill in the 1960s, when it was a very deprived area. This hymn was written in 1960, whilst Revd. Geoffrey Ainger was a Methodist minister at Loughton, Essex and was first published in "Songs from Notting Hill" in 1964. The theme reflected Revd. Ainger's concern for homeless in the area – an official indifference to the plight of people who lacked a roof over their heads. We shall sing hymn number 193, 'Born in the night, Mary's child,'

**1. Born in the night,
Mary's child,
A long way from your home:
Coming in need,
Mary's child,
Born in a borrowed room.**

**2. Clear, shining Light,
Mary's child,
Your face lights up our way;
Light of the world,
Mary's child,
Dawn on our darkened day.**

**3. Truth of our life,
Mary's child,
You tell us God is good;
Prove it is true,
Mary's child,
Go to your cross of wood.**

**4. Hope of the world,
Mary's child,
You're coming soon to reign;
King of the earth,
Mary's child,
Walk in our streets again.**

© Geoffrey Ainger (1925 - 2013)

Benediction.

May the joy of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, the worship of the wise men and the peace of the Christ child be yours, this Christmas. May Christ, who by his birth gathered into one all things earthly and all things heavenly, fill you with joy and peace. And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all and those we love for evermore. Amen.