

A service for 31st December, 2023 (StF)

Call to Worship: 'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year.'

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 to you better than light and safer than a known way!'

So I went forth and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

These words of Minnie Louise Haskins were used by King George VI for his broadcast to the nation at Christmas 1939 at a time of great uncertainty and fear for the future. Christmas is when we celebrate God offering his hand to fallen humankind, so let us come to our Saviour God as we sing a hymn by a man dubbed 'The father of English Hymnody', Isaac Watts, who began to write hymns when he complained about the dull metrical Psalms at his dissenters chapel in Southampton and was challenged by his fierce father to write something better – and he did! Hymn number 330, 'Joy to the world, the Lord is come!'

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.

2. Joy to the earth, 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.

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.

© Isaac Watts {1674 – 1748}

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we come to worship you at the end of a year of tribulation and anxiety as well as a few blessings, too. We may face an uncertain, even threatening future, but we do so in the light of your love which you have revealed through Jesus, your only Son who came amongst us as a helpless baby without status or wealth. Some of the opportunities and challenges of the coming year will excite us, though others will 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.

Jesus is Immanuel, God with us and among us, sharing our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears and our trials and temptations, yet without sinning, showing us how you want us to live. His life, death and resurrection have broken the hold of sin

and death, offering us all everlasting life through faith in him. Therefore, Lord, we wholeheartedly offer the best of our worship, for you are our Lord and God and worthy of all honour, glory, power and praise.

We come to celebrate joyfully the birth of Jesus, who came to live among us, as the true Light so we might know your holy will and purpose: he came to die for the sins of the whole world and was raised to grant us everlasting life through faith in him. Thank you, Lord, for all that you give us and do for us, for we know how you have blessed us from our earliest days.

However, when we consider ourselves, we see how short we fall of what you would have us be, for we don't always love and serve you wholeheartedly and, all too often, fail to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Merciful Lord, help us change our ways and forgive us in the beautiful name of Jesus.

Loving God, you proclaim that our sins are forgiven and you call us to follow you, once more, free from the burden of our guilt. May our response to your grace be to serve you and our neighbours with warm, caring hearts, so that our lives bring honour to your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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.

We continue our worship as we sing a hymn by Revd. Dr. Andrew Pratt a Methodist minister from Paignton, Devon with a Master's Degree in Marine Biology – who says science and faith are incompatible? Hymn number 229, 'Mary and Joseph came to the temple'. The tune may not be familiar, so we shall listen to the first verse and then see how we go.

**1. Mary and Joseph
came to the Temple,
brought the boy Jesus,
offered him there.
People were waiting,
wanting to greet him,
long had they sought him,
solace for care.**

**2. Anna had prayed there,
widowed, long waiting;
worshipping God by
day and by night.
Now she is praising,
filled with elation;
here is God's promise,
Christ is her light.**

**3. Simeon sings now
God offers blessing,
Brilliantly gilding
Dawn of his day;**

light in the darkness,
never extinguished,
light of all nations,
light up our way.

© Andrew Pratt (born 1948)

In our prayers of intercession, when I say 'Your kingdom come', please respond with, 'Your will be done'.

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 through our discipleship. May we answer your call to serve you through the mission of our churches, or by supporting the work done by food banks, street pastors and the Salvation Army, or any organization that serves the poor and vulnerable in our society, or by supporting Christian Aid, All We Can and other relief organizations that address the grievous poverty in the Developing World.

'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.

We pray for our church, the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide and enable us to serve our communities and support the poor and broken-hearted. Help us to find new ways, not only to preach good news but to live it day by day and to be a light of hope in a gloomy world. Help us to live in the light of your birth and fill us with your love for all.

'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.

Lord of all, hear our cry of grief for the many lives lost in Gaza, as a result of the heinous attack by Hamas in southern Israel and in subsequent fighting. Remember in your mercy people who have lost loved-ones, been injured and traumatised, for those taken as hostages and also ordinary civilians trapped in Gaza with nowhere to flee. We pray for an end not only to this war and the one still raging in Ukraine, but to all conflicts around the world. May lasting peace, based upon justice and mercy, be established world-wide, rather than remaining a forlorn hope and may the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and discrimination receive the practical and emotional support they need to rebuild their lives.

'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.

Lord of shalom, of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble, as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one, for this time of year adds to the pain they bear. We pray for people who are facing unemployment, addictions, loneliness and bereavement at a time we usually associate with joyful celebration. 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 need your help at this time Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so it may bring them healing, comfort, hope and peace. Enfold us all in your love and mercy, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, grant us healing, courage, hope, strength and transcending peace, thereby setting us free to serve you for ever.

'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm, help us to lead Christ-centred lives by sharing the abundance of your love with all-comers and fit us to boldly bring the light of your grace to this corner of your kingdom throughout the New Year, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 2 verses 21 to 40

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

The child’s father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother:

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. Amen.

We shall sing hymn number 228, ‘Hail to the Lord’s anointed,’ which was written by a radical newspaper owner and social activist from Sheffield, James Montgomery, as a Christmas ode for a Moravian settlement near Leeds in 1821.

1. Hail to the Lord’s Anointed,

Great David’s greater Son!

Hail, in the time appointed,

His reign on earth begun!

He comes to break oppression,

To set the captives free,

To take away transgression

And rule in equity.

2. He comes, with succour speedy,

To those who suffer wrong;

To help the poor and needy,

And bid the weak be strong;

To give them songs for sighing,

Their darkness turn to light,

Whose souls, condemned and dying,
Were precious in his sight.

3. He shall come down like showers
Upon the fruitful earth;
Love, joy and hope, like flowers,
Spring in his path to birth;
Before him, on the mountains,
Shall peace the herald go;
And righteousness, in fountains,
From hill to valley flow.

4. Kings shall fall down before him
And gold and incense bring;
All nations shall adore him,
His praise all people sing;
To him shall prayer unceasing
And daily vows ascend,
His kingdom still increasing,
A kingdom without end.

5. O'er every foe victorious,
He on his throne shall rest;
From age to age more glorious,
All-blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never
His covenant remove;
His name shall stand for ever,
His changeless name of Love.

© James Montgomery (1771 – 1854)

Sermon: *“My eyes have seen your salvation”* Luke 2:30

When Field Marshall Rommel was defeated at the battle of El Alamein in 1942, Sir Winston Churchill broadcast these words: **“This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”** This is something Christians need to remember at Christmas, for Christ’s salvation comes not from his birth but from his death and resurrection, so the nativity stories are a prologue to earth-shaking events some three decades later. Luke, who wrote for a primarily Gentile audience, told us of a couple of incidents that followed Jesus’ birth, one of which dealt with twelve-year-old Jesus being ‘lost’ by his parents when he stayed behind in the temple discussing the scriptures with Scribes and Rabbis, the other which we shall deal with today.

The Torah requires Jewish parents to have their male children circumcised at a week old and the mother to be ritually purified thirty-three days later. The mother of a daughter was considered impure twice that time and was forbidden to come into contact with anything holy. The Law also declared first-born males holy to the Lord, so parents had to redeem them by paying five shekels to the priest. In addition, the mother who was to be purified was required to bring a lamb and a dove as an offering, but if they were too poor, two doves could be sacrificed instead. Thus, Luke observed that Jesus’ parents were among the devout poor, for Mary had only two doves. Luke strikes home the point once more that Jesus shared the common lot of the poor, rather than the aristocracy or privileged. Christ is Immanuel – God with us, not remote from us!

While tradition claims Simeon as an elderly priest, the Gospel account confirms neither, although his readiness to go to his Maker tends to suggest he was elderly at least. We do know that he was just and devout, **‘waiting for the consolation of Israel’**, in other words, seeking the Messiah. He had been drawn to the temple under the power of the Holy Spirit (**Parakletos**) to meet Israel’s consolation (**Parakletis**), for Simeon had a premonition that he would not die until he had seen the **‘Lord’s Christ’**. He was in the temple at the time when Mary was presenting her firstborn to the Lord and instantly recognised the infant for who he was. Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and praised God in the words which we call, **‘Nunc dimittis’**: **“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”** Notice that Simeon declared God’s salvation is for all people, not only Jews, for at the time when Luke wrote his gospel many Jewish Christians still expected Gentile followers to be circumcised and observe both the Torah and festivals of the Hebrews. Dr. Luke clearly begged to differ with such Christians!

It is hardly surprising that Mary and Joseph marvelled at Simeon’s words, for he was probably a stranger who had no inkling of the angel’s pronouncement, nor of the holy birth. But their wonderment must have been marred when Simeon added that the cost of the salvation Jesus would bring was grievous: whilst the expected order of those to be saved would be reversed, for many who considered themselves righteous would reject Christ and fall, whilst the despised and sinful would believe and be raised; as a result, the Good News brought by Jesus would face opposition and **‘...a sword will pierce your own soul too.’** In other words, Simeon was warning Mary that she would see her son die!

Luke’s account also relates how an eighty-four-year-old prophetess, Anna, came and offered praise and thanks to God for sending the redeemer of Israel. This is significant, for it shows the spiritual awareness of elderly people – something that my work in chaplaincy made me very aware of. The Gospels don’t really speak much of elderly people, probably because life-expectancy was about forty at the time, but here we read of how two people who had sought the Messiah faithfully for many years recognised him as a helpless baby, whilst many others failed to recognise the adult Christ, despite his teaching and healing.

This leads us to the challenge of our reading. When Jesus comes again – as surely he will – will we be ready to greet him, indeed, will we even recognise him? Many priests, Scribes and Pharisees waited for the Messiah, but when he came among them, they failed to recognise him, for he was not what they were looking for. They expected the Christ to conform to their image, not the other way round. Many Jews expected the Messiah to be a warrior king, or a resistance-leader like Judas Maccabaeus, who free them from Roman occupation. They were looking for a nobleman, a descendant of King David, a warrior king, not a common carpenter and certainly not from the despised region of Galilee, where Jews and Gentiles lived together and from where many false Messiahs had come in the past. Moreover, they expected to be congratulated for obeying the very letter of the Law of Moses, rather than its spirit, preferring self-righteousness to loving-kindness and justice, so it is not surprising that they were upset when Jesus denounced them as hypocrites and sought out sinners, the ceremonially unclean and foreigners instead!

Should Jesus return tomorrow, are our hearts and minds open enough to recognise him for who he is, rather than expecting him to conform to our images of

what the Messiah should be? We should certainly avoid the stereotypical pictures of our Lord from pictures and films. There is no more reason why God should point him out now than he did two thousand years ago; why should he return as a male, or a Jew? Why should we expect his congratulations when we consider the mess we have made of the world, the fractured relationships between denominations, our failure to address issues of war and poverty? If Jesus comes tomorrow, I expect him to be very critical of what his followers are doing, but I hope we are humble enough to listen to his criticism and amend our lives – for that is what his followers did at his first incarnation.

Therefore, let us face 2024 resolutely despite all its challenges – and promises, too – seeking to live as Christ wants us to, but keeping our hearts and minds open to recognise his kingship through his words and actions. Let us not allow our prejudices and stereotypical images of who and what Christ is like to blind us to his presence. Instead, let us look for Christ among the disadvantaged, the stranger, the poor and homeless, for that is where he is most likely to be found – and when he comes may we, like Simeon and Anna, recognise and worship him as our Friend and Saviour. Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn written by a suffragan Bishop of Thetford, Norfolk, who is a very gifted hymn-writer, Timothy Dudley-Smith. It is number 470, 'Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,'

**1. Lord, for the years, your love has kept and guided,
Urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
Sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.**

**2. Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires us,
Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
Teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.**

**3. Lord, for our land in this our generation,
Spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:
For young and old, for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.**

**4. Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt you,
Loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,
Hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you:
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.**

**5. Lord for ourselves; in living pow'r remake us –
Self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,
Past put behind us, for the future take us:
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.**

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Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.