

A service for 26th December, 2021 (StF) Christmas 1

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 Bishop Timothy Dudley Smith, 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.**

© Timothy Dudley-Smith {1926 -}

Let us pray

God of grace and glory, we come to worship you at the end of 2021, with all the opportunities and challenges of the new one ahead of us. Some of these challenges make us excited, but others fill us with trepidation. Help us to remember that you are always here with us as we venture into the future, for you entered our world as a helpless child to be with in all we do. Thus, we come to pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your guiding word, for you are the Lord of creation, sustainer of life and our Saviour. You are our strength and stay in both good and bad times, so we humbly offer you all honour, glory and praise in our worship.

Lord, we adore you, for you not only created the universe and all that lives on it, but when human beings had rebelled against you and had darkened your creation with sin and misery, you sent your only Son, Christ Jesus, to save us. He came without status or wealth, but was born in humble Bethlehem, in the stable of an inn, to ordinary

parents. As Jesus grew among people like us, he shared our joys and sorrows, trials and temptation, our hopes and fears, yet he did so without sinning, showing us how you want us to live. Because of his self-sacrifice at Calvary, Jesus broke the power of sin and when he was raised from the tomb on the third day, he triumphed over death which no longer has the last word and he offers eternal life to all who believe in him.

Amazing God, such love is beyond our understanding, for we confess that, although we want lead good lives, we often fail to love our neighbours as we love ourselves and we fail to love and serve you wholeheartedly. At times we fail to show kindness to neighbours who are in need or trouble, though we know we really ought to. Lord, help us turn away from our wrongdoing and forgive us in Jesus' name.

Gracious, loving God, we believe you always hear and answer our prayers, so confident that you have already pardoned us, we ask you to help bear the light of your lovingkindness in everything we do and say, in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord taught his disciples:

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.

The second carol was written by the 'Father of English hymnody', Isaac Watts in 1719. He was one of the earliest authors, who changed churches from singing metrical Psalms to hymn-singing. Number 330, 'Joy to the world,'

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}

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

Sovereign God, you are the Light of the world, our trusty guide through life and our refuge in times of trouble. Therefore, as the old year ends and a new one begins, we turn to you, asking for your wisdom, courage, guidance and help as we seek to act as your earthly hands in this corner of your kingdom. Although the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us at times, we are not afraid to ask

you to reach out and inspire those with power and influence to heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord, at a time when most of the world is rejoicing at Christ's birth, hear our prayer for people who are facing undue pressures in these troubled times: people who face problems as a result of the COVID19 pandemic, or those who have difficult choices to make, or who have problems with addiction, debt, or unemployment, or homelessness. Grant us the power to help where we are able, besides providing agencies to help them, but also open their hearts and minds, so they may have the courage to make changes to overcome their problems.

As we remember how our Saviour came into the world, homeless and in need, we pray for the poor, disfranchised and marginalised in the world, particularly people from the Developing world who have neither fresh water, nor sanitation, nor medicines and for whom life is brutal, bitter and short. Loving heavenly Father, help us to play what part we can to build a better world by seeking justice for all-comers, by striving to end poverty here and abroad, by sharing the earth's resources instead of fighting over them.

The Christ-child came as Prince of Peace, but his parents were forced to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod's wrath, so in his infancy he experienced what it is to be a refugee. Therefore, we pray for the victims of wars, of terrorism, prejudice and persecution. Teach those who govern the nations and indeed all humankind to find better ways of resolving differences with neighbours, so warfare becomes consigned to history, as lasting peace which only love, justice and mercy can bring, is established throughout the world. Grant that we mirror this prayer in our own lives, by caring for one another as Christ Jesus taught us to. Bless the work of relief agencies, refugee support groups and peace negotiators as they seek to help ease suffering in war zones.

Holy God, may your Church, both local and worldwide, learn to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by proclaiming Good News with one voice and serving him with united hearts, so that all who do not yet know Christ as their Saviour and Friend will turn to him.

As Jesus came as Lord of healing and wellbeing, look with compassion on all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. May they find healing, renewed strength and hope, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia and their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them and for who the past twenty months have been nightmarish.

Remember, too, in your mercy neighbours who are lonely, afraid, unemployed, or overworked, besides all who feel undervalued and unloved, largely because of the effects of coronavirus restrictions. We pray for everyone who has lost loved ones and for whom this time of year is particularly difficult. In a time of silence we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care. As we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them: Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love which brings healing, courage, comfort and peace.

Abba, Father God, look upon us, our families and our friends with compassion. As the old year ends and a new one begins, keep us safe and guide us in your holy ways, so we bear the light of the gospel message into the darkest corners of your kingdom, in the glorious name of the Christ-child, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We continue our worship as we sing a carol written by Christina Georgina Rossetti, a daughter of an Italian émigré, a clever man who had despaired of politics in his native land and who became Professor of Italian at Kings College, London. Christina's elder brothers were Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti, the former becoming a notable artist and poet, a leading member of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. The last verse is virtually a sermon in itself. 'What can I give him, / Poor as I am? / If I were a shepherd, / I would bring a lamb; / If I were a wise man, / I would do my part; / Yet what I can I give him – / Give my heart.' Hymn number 209, 'In the bleak midwinter,'

1. In the bleak midwinter

Frosty wind made moan,

Earth stood hard as iron,

Water like a stone:

Snow had fallen , snow on snow,

Snow on snow;

In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

2. Our God, heav'n cannot hold him

Nor earth sustain;

Heav'n and earth shall flee away

When he comes to reign.

In the bleak midwinter

A stable place sufficed

The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

3. Enough for him, whom Cherubim

Worship night and day,

A breastful of milk

And a mangerful of hay;

Enough for him, whom angels

Fall down before,

The ox and ass and camel which adore.

4. Angels and archangels

May have gathered there,

Cherubim and seraphim

Thronged the air;

But his mother only

In her maiden bliss

Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

5. What can I give him,

Poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd,

I would bring a lamb;

If I were a wise man

I would do my part,

Yet what I can I give him –

Give my heart.

The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 2 verses 41 to 52

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends.

When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him,

“Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men. Amen.

“Our God contracted to a span, / Incomprehensibly made man.” Wonderful words and theology of Charles Wesley! We shall sing hymn number 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 earth’s and 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 (1707 – 1788)

Address: *“Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”* Luke 2:49
When I was three or four, I went to Hockley, near Birmingham’s Jewellery Quarter, with my parents and my younger brother and sister to do some shopping. Somehow, I wandered off while my parents were distracted and, having been found alone by a passing stranger, was able to give him my name and address. I shall always be grateful to that man, because he took me home and waited till my distraught parents arrived some time later, having told the police that I was missing! Seventy years later, I can still recall my parents’ faces when they found me safe: fearful, angry and mightily relieved, so Luke’s account of the boy Jesus’ disappearance rings true to me.

This is the only account of Jesus’ childhood, so you may wonder what its significance is for the first Sunday after Christmas and why it took Joseph and Mary three days to find Jesus. Jesus was twelve, which is the age when modern Jewish boys take their place as adults in the religious community after the bar mitzvah ceremony. Although bar mitzvah was not instituted in the First Century A.D., twelve-year-old boys studied to become “a son of the law”, often learning a trade at the same time. They attended public worship and, as Jewish men were expected to take part in the feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, Joseph and Mary would have taken him the seventy-mile journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem as an obligation of faith.

However, they would not have travelled alone, for even in Roman-occupied Palestine bandits preyed on small groups, so there was safety in numbers. Indeed, often most occupants of whole villages would travel to the Holy City, for mutual support and company. Consequently, for dwellers in Nazareth, from which it might take most of a week to walk to the temple, travelling at the pace of the slowest, such pilgrimages were limited to the most important festival, Pessach, or the Passover. Rather like the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca on the Haj, Passover drew huge crowds of visitors. The Romano-Jewish historian, Josephus, estimated that 256000 sheep were sacrificed in the temple each year at Pessach and, as ten adults were required before each sheep could be slaughtered, it seems that at least two and a half million Jews attended each festival. With such huge crowds it is easier to understand why a young boy could be missed.

You may still wonder why Mary and Joseph took three days to find their son. I suspect that today, they’d have received a Parenting Order at the behest of some over-zealous official! However, as whole communities travelled in a kind of First Century equivalent of a walking bus, older children would have walked together, even staying with relatives and friends on their long journey and, in a more trusting age than ours, nothing would be thought about such a practice. Nevertheless, when they realised that he was with neither relatives nor friends, Mary and Joseph anxiously retraced their steps, searching for Jesus, until they discovered him in the temple. He wasn’t marvelling at the architecture of Herod’s masterpiece – which, incidentally, was still under construction – but was debating Torah, the Law given to Moses, with the most pre-eminent rabbis and scribes in Judea. Teaching methods were rigorous, with teachers and students taking turns to be questioner and answerer, but the twelve year old Jesus already possessed such a grasp of the Scriptures that the experts were

besides themselves with amazement at his understanding and answers – particularly as his provincial accent would have betrayed him to be from a district despised by Judeans, for Galilee had a mixed population, with a high proportion of Gentiles and was thus unfashionable.

Considering that Mary knew that Jesus was God's Son, her anxiety must have been almost unbearable: it is bad enough to lose your own child, but God's Son! Her protest, "**Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you**", seems quite mild in the circumstances, but Jesus was unabashed, even amazed at the question. He replied, "**Why were you searching for me? 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'**" In other words, even as he grew into adulthood, Christ Jesus knew that he had a divine mission and a special relationship with Almighty God.

Why did Luke include this story in his gospel? He was pressing home the point that Jesus isn't just a remarkable prophet, like John the Baptist. He is more than a miracle-worker, teacher and healer: he is fully man and fully divine, as Charles Wesley put it in his hymn, "**Let earth and heaven combine,**" '**Our God contracted to a span, / Incomprehensibly made man.**' It was not only the shepherds who were awed by the young Jesus: the greatest scholars in the land found him astonishing. You may ask why they turned against him twenty years later and likely answer is if a young person asks challenging questions, they are not seen as a threat because they have no power, whereas authorities often see radical adults as threats to society.

The great Methodist preacher, **Lord Soper**, is now revered for his sincerity and courage in challenging the governments and the Establishment of his day on social issues, yet, during the Second World War his pacifist views resulted in his name being placed on a list of subversives who were investigated and kept under surveillance by the Secret Services. **John Wesley was nearly killed by a mob in Wednesbury during 1743** after local clergymen branded him a revolutionary and anti-monarchist.

It is truly remarkable that twelve year old Jesus already knew the path he was being called to walk in obedience to his heavenly Father, yet was willing to do so for love of sinners like us. This child, before whose crib we bow in reverence, like the shepherds and the Magi, this child is not just an ordinary baby, but is the very essence of God's love for us all. **The Magi brought him gifts, but what can we offer?** The answer lies in the closing verse of Christina Rossetti's carol, "**In the bleak midwinter**": '**What can I give him, / Poor as I am? / If I were a shepherd / I would bring a lamb; / If I were a wise man, / I would do my part; / Yet what I can I give him – / Give my heart!**' May our discipleship be radical and unwavering, for much needs to change in our world and Jesus calls us to strive for his Father's kingdom. Nevertheless, may we let the light of Christ's love shine through our hearts and remember: **Christ is for life, not just for Christmas! Amen.**

We close our worship as we sing a hymn I wrote seven years ago. It is sung to "Epiphany", number 227 in "Singing the Faith", 'Light of our life, you came to us from heaven,'

**1. Light of our life, you came to us from heaven,
Born in a dark, meagre Bethlehem stall:
Lord, God in man, you have dwelt here among us,
Teacher and healer and Saviour of all.**

**2. True Word of God, you have shared in our sorrow,
You knew privation from your earliest hour:
Endured rejection, betrayal and mocking,
Died on the cross to defeat Satan's power.**

**3. O Peace of God, the despised Suff'ring Servant;
Though crucified, you were raised – glorified.
God's boundless love is revealed in the gospels;
Our deepest wish is to walk by your side.**

**4. Great Hope from God, come to all who're despairing,
Bowed down by sickness, by troubles and woes:
You came to offer both wholeness and comfort,
You are the Source from which true healing flows.**

**5. Deep Joy of God, you relinquished your glory –
Except for love – when incarnate you came:
Accept our offering of cheerful compassion,
Caring for neighbours in your precious name.**

*Martin Rider – 3rd Dec, 2014 (To "Spean" StF 227i or "Epiphany" StF 595i)
for Providence Methodist. Mod 19th Jan, 2015.*

Benediction

May the faith of Mary fill us; the steadfastness of Joseph uphold us and the wonder of the shepherds be ours this Christmas. May the diligence of the Magi guide our discipleship, may the joy of the angel host and, above all else may the love of the Christ-child live within us now and always. Amen.