

A service for 27th December, 2020 (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.

We shall sing a hymn, originally written in Latin by an exiled Roman Catholic Revolutionary, called John Wade. The title is believed to have been a coded message to Jacobean living in England to rise up and place King James III on the throne – and we just think of it as an excellent carol! Hymn number 212, 'O come, all ye faithful'.

1. O come, all ye faithful,

Joyful and triumphant,

O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;

Come and behold him,

Born the King of angels; *Chorus*

O come, let us adore him,

Christ the Lord.

2. God of God,

Light of Light,

Lo! he abhors not the Virgin's womb:

Very God,

Begotten, not created; *Chorus*

3. Sing, choirs of angels,

Sing in exultation,

Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;

Glory to God

In the highest; *Chorus*

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Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we come to worship you at the end of a year of sickness, isolation, tribulation and fear, a time that most of us will be glad to see end. We 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. His birth in the stable of an inn, at humble Bethlehem, to ordinary parents, shows clearly your concern for everybody, not just an exclusive minority. Although some of the opportunities and challenges of 2021 will excite us, 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.

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. Most of all, thank you for Christ Jesus our Saviour and friend, without whom we would be hopeless and lost.

Merciful God, who became incarnate in order to show us how we should serve you and to love our neighbours wholeheartedly, forgive us when we still fall short of what you call us to be in our thoughts, words and deeds, for our lack of faith and trust. May your Holy Spirit help us to change our ways, so our hearts are warm and welcoming with the love you give us so abundantly.

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 cheerfully from now onward, living out good news in all we say and do, and bringing the gospel light to a world darkened by sin and selfishness. Amen.

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.

Our next hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Many of their hymns are set to Scots ballads, but this is sung to 'Scarlet Ribbons'. We shall sing hymn number 222, 'Who would think that what was needed'.

1. Who would think that what was needed

**To transform and save the earth
Might not be a plan or army,
Proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision,
That a child might lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.**

2. Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,

**Monarchs scorn and angels sing;
Such a place as none would reckon
Hosts a holy, helpless thing.
Stable beasts and by-passed strangers
Watch a baby laid in hay:**

God surprises earth with heaven, / Coming here on Christmas Day.

**3. Centuries of skill and science
Span the past from which we move,**

**Yet experience questions whether,
With such progress, we improve.
While the human lot we ponder,
Lest our hopes and humour fray,
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.**

© John L. Bell (born 1949) & Graham Maule (born 1958)

We come now to our prayers of intercession.

When I say, 'Lord in your mercy' please respond with, 'Hear our prayer'. 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 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.

We pray for the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide us through this pandemic, so we can serve our communities and support the poor and broken-hearted. Help us to find new ways, not only 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.

Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

Lord of all, we pray for countries afflicted by war, or terrorism, that their leaders will learn to seek the ways of peace and will learn to negotiate and compromise instead of striking out at opponents. We pray for lands where people are persecuted for their beliefs, race or gender, that leaders will seek mercy and justice in their dealings.

Remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism and oppression, that they may be given help to find healing in body, mind and spirit.

We pray for everybody involved in Brexit negotiations that they may come at last to an accord that avoids damage to the United Kingdom and Europe. We pray, too, for a peaceful transition in the presidency of the USA and for healing of the deep rifts among the political parties.

Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, we pray for people we know who are sick in body, mind or spirit, others who are suffering long-term effects of coronavirus and bring them hope and healing. We remember people who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers, that they can find peace of mind, help and comfort, especially at this time of crisis.

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, thereby setting us free to serve you for ever.

Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

Loving Lord, guide those who govern us and their advisors that they may adopt policies that will bring us safely through this pandemic. Give them the courage and wisdom, so they do what is right and bless the NHS, keyworkers and scientists as they strive to heal us and keep us safe. As we approach the New Year, we still feel disempowered, confused, unsure of what to pray for. Hear and answer the groaning of our spirit and grant us the wisdom and courage we need to face an uncertain future, with hope grounded in your redemptive love.

Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

Abba, Father God, bless us all and our friends and families. Protect us against harm and help us to resist the temptation to sin. Above all else, send us to live out the Good News in the glorious name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

The author of our next hymn, Reginald Heber was appointed Bishop of Calcutta in 1823. However, his duties were not confined to that one city, but to much of the South Pacific, including Ceylon and Australia, for he was the only Anglican Bishop in that hemisphere. His sense of duty drove him to travel tirelessly during his three years as Bishop. The heat and hard work took their toll of his health and he died at Trichinopoly, aged only forty-two. In the fourth verse Bishop Heber expressed similar sentiments as Christina Rossetti in 'In the Bleak Midwinter', 'Vainly we offer each ample oblation, / Vainly with gifts would his favour secure; / Richer by far is the heart's adoration; / Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.' We shall sing hymn number 227, 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,'

**1. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.**

**2. Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining;
Low lies his head, with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,
Maker, and Monarch, and Saviour of all.**

**3. Say, shall we yield him, in costly devotion,
Odours of Edom, and offerings divine?
Gems of the mountain, and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?**

**4. Vainly we offer each ample oblation;
Vainly with gifts would his favour secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration;
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.**

**5. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.**

© Reginald Heber {1783 – 1826}

The Old Testament reading is Isaiah chapter 63 verses 7 to 9

I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us—yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, “Surely they are my people, sons and daughters who will not be false to me”; and so he became their Saviour. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. Amen.

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.

We continue our worship with a written by Percy Dearmer, who with Ralph Vaughan Williams and Martin Shaw produced “Songs of Praise” in 1926, a hymnal much used in schools. We shall sing hymn 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}

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

Shalom chaverim! May the full blessings of Adonai, the Lord God be upon you and your families. Let me introduce myself. I am Jacob Bar Schmucl, the elder son of an innkeeper in Bethlehem, the humble town where King David was born. The preacher has asked me to testify about the so-called Massacre of the Innocents, about thirty-three years ago now. I say so-called, because the actual number of boys killed by Herod's troops was fewer than twenty, though Bethlehem is a small town and, anyway, if you have lost a child to such savagery – as did my aunt Miriam – the death count is irrelevant.

It began when Caesar Augustus ordered a census in his conquered territories, so he could ensure that he was receiving the correct taxes. All Jews had to go to the district where their families belonged, so as you can imagine Bethlehem was soon filled to capacity. Dad was delighted, because every room was occupied and he anticipated large profits. Then one night, a man from Galilee, Joseph Bar Jacob, banged on the inn door. He was grey with tiredness and fear, for his wife, Mary, was about to give birth, but his family had told him they had no room for him. So had every other innkeeper. Now dad was a hard-headed businessman, so he was about to send them away when my mother gave him one of her looks that would shrivel a fig on the vine. She suggested that, if she cleaned out the stall where our livestock was kept, the young woman could shelter there. I was only ten, so I didn't play any part in what happened next, but I did see the baby boy next morning, wrapped in swaddling cloths, as is our custom.

I gathered that some shepherds had arrived, claiming that angels had said the baby would be our Saviour and left making such a commotion that everybody but me was woken up – but that's shepherds for you; troublemakers the lot of them. Well, a fortnight later, Joseph, Mary and their baby, Jesus, were able to move into a relative's house until they were able to return to Galilee. They'd been living there for more than a year when some oriental gentlemen arrived. They told dad that they'd been following a star for nearly two years, because they were astrologers, or Magi from a place you now call the Yemen. He asked why on earth they'd travelled fifteen hundred miles, just following a star and they replied that it marked the birth of a great king. That made dad laugh, because our king, Herod, was anything but great. It was known that he'd had several relatives executed, including his wife, Mariamne and three sons, so he was not a man to be crossed.

When the Magi told him that they'd spoken to Herod about their quest for a new king, dad stopped laughing, for he knew something bad would follow, though he didn't anticipate anything as terrible as unfolded ten days later. I heard that they'd visited Joseph and Mary, done homage to their little son, Jesus, and had gone away the same night. Mom and dad were more than a little put-out, because they were wealthy and they could have lodged with us. Strangely, early next morning I saw Joseph, Mary and their baby leaving Bethlehem on a donkey. I asked where they were going. Joseph said he was moving to Egypt, but I should tell no one – not even my parents. It seemed strange, but I did as I was told. Then a few hours later, armed soldiers – the Palace Guard – marched into town.

Without further ado, they went from house to house, demanding that all boys aged two or less be given to them. Then they killed them. Poor Aunt Miriam had her son, Haggai, torn from her arms and stabbed by one of Herod's thugs. I'm sure Herod was scared that somebody would seize his throne, but that was no excuse for what he ordered his men to do. It was pointless anyway, for he was dead within four years, infested with maggots. I know some scholars now say that the massacre never

occurred, for the great historian, Josephus made no record of it, but twenty small boys were of no significance nationally and anyway, with Herod's track record would you have put stylus to papyrus to tell the world what he had done? I tell you now, you wouldn't if you wanted to remain alive! I'm just glad that Joseph, Mary and their baby, Jesus, escaped just in time, because if he is our Saviour it would have been disastrous had Herod killed him.

Aunt Miriam never got over Haggai's death and was tortured by an evil spirit, that is until a Galilean called Jesus cured her in Bethany, two years ago. She is convinced that the Jesus who healed her is the same Jesus born at our inn all those years ago and she maintains he is the Messiah for whom we Jews have been waiting for generations. May the Lord bless Miriam, she is usually right. I hope she's right, because our society is in a dreadful mess, what with lawlessness and Roman occupation. Anyway, some visitors from Capernaum told me he is coming to celebrate Pessach in Jerusalem in a couple of months' time. I'd like to meet him, to see what kind of man he is. Reports say he is a great rabbi, a healer and miracle worker, so perhaps he is God's anointed, after all: I'll have to see.

So what have my experiences taught me? Firstly, God's care extends to all – even to unreliable shepherds and star-gazing Gentiles; If Jesus really is the Messiah, the Lord cares so much he sent Jesus as a helpless child, without privileges or protection, to a world where people sought his life. Jesus came as one of us, not as a King or conqueror. Above all, I'm intrigued enough to seek out Jesus, so I may find out what the Good News is all about and follow him should he call. I know Mary did when she accepted God's call to become Jesus' mother and so did Joseph when he preserved his little boy from the evil king's wrath. **Friends, as we begin a New Year, let's face it in faith and obedience, confident that the Lord God who gave his Son for us won't let us down. May we remain determined to do his will and play our part in building his kingdom's. Shabbat shalom. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was written by another bishop, the Right Reverend Timothy Dudley-Smith, Suffragan Bishop of Thetford. He wrote this hymn in 1967 for a centenary celebration service for The Scripture Union at St. Paul's Cathedral. We shall sing hymn number 470, 'Lord, for the years'

- 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 -}*

Benediction.

May the faithfulness of Mary, the trust of Joseph, the wonder of the shepherds, the steadfastness of the Magi, the rapture of the angel host and the love given to the world in the form of a helpless Child, keep and sustain us all now and forevermore and may God grant us and the world his true peace in Christ Jesus, our Friend and Redeemer. Amen.