

Bridge Court MHA Christmas Service – 25th December, 2021 (StF)

Call to Worship: Isaiah chapter 9 verse 2 and 6 to 7

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. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. Amen.

Our opening carol was written by Charles Wesley in 1739, as 'Hark how all the welkin rings' but his elder brother, John, changed it to 'Hark! The herald angels sing' and it was an immediate success, becoming even more popular when set to a melody by Felix Mendelssohn a hundred and one years later. We sing number 202, 'Hark! The herald angels sing'.

**1. Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim
Christ is born in Bethlehem! *Chorus:*
*Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!***

**2. Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ, the everlasting Lord;
Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of a Virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with us to dwell;
Jesus, our Immanuel! *Chorus:***

**3. Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that we no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth,
Born to give us second birth: *Chorus:***

© Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

Let us pray.

Amazing God, we have come to celebrate your boundless, constant love for all humanity on this Christmas Day. You took our mortal flesh and came to us as Jesus, a helpless baby, homeless and born in a stable to ordinary parents in an insignificant town, to experience our lives, to know our happiness and woes, our pleasures and pain, our trials and temptations. You gave him to the world, even though you knew he would be rejected, suffer and die to save us.

Although we often fail to live as you call us to, we ask you to forgive us and transform our lives. Often we crowd Christ out of Christmas because of the pressures and pleasures of the season, so we ask you to help us to make room for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives, for without him we have no hope. We believe that through Jesus alone, we have a fresh start with you, our heavenly Father, freed from the burden of sin.

Therefore, gracious, loving God, as we thank you for all you have done, may we spread the Good News of your Salvation in all that we do and say. Teach us to make time to serve you as you call us to, so that, by helping and loving others in Jesus' lovely name, we may bring you honour, praise and glory. Amen.

We say the prayer that Jesus gave 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}

The Gospel reading is John chapter 1 verses 1 to 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of human beings. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all people might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. Amen.

Our next carol was written in the USA at the end of the Nineteenth Century by an unknown writer. Number 191. 'Away in a manger,'

**1. Away in a manger, no crib for his bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.**

**2. The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.
I love thee, Lord Jesus! Look down from the sky,
And stay by my bedside till morning is nigh.**

**3. Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me I pray.
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven to live with thee there.**

Address: *"The Light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."* **John 1:5**
Sometimes the world can seem a dark and frightening place, especially now amid the COVID 19 pandemic, with its attendant anxiety and restrictions to our freedom: a time when the Media bombards us with woeful tales of cruelty, violence, climate crisis, famine, inflation and conflicts. But when Jesus came into our world, life was hard for Jews. After several centuries of foreign rule, Judea was occupied by Rome, which is why Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register with the authorities for tax purposes. There was no coronavirus, but disease, cruelty, murder and fighting were commonplace and many Jews despaired that God seemed far away, perhaps that he had abandoned them.

Instead of giving us a nativity story, John got straight to the point: God has sent his only Son into this world of darkness as the true Light who would bring life in all its fullness to us. Jesus left the bliss and glory of heaven and came as a baby, vulnerable and without privilege to share our common lot. He came as proof of God's redemptive love as the Light that guides us to his Father.

There are two main kinds of light: the first is a dazzling light that drives away all darkness from the room; the second is a smaller light that allows us to see what is in the room, but which has shadows and dark corners, too. The dazzling light drives away the darkness and effectively denies the existence of the dark, whilst the smaller light co-exists with it. With a small light, or candle, you can see what you need – a path forward to the door, or to a cupboard or chair, but there are dark corners where you can stay and share the grief and confusion of loss, places where you can mourn and come to terms with your pain until you find enough healing to be able to continue. The small light gives out enough illumination to see hope for the future, to experience God's presence, so you can sit in the shadows and lament until the wounds of loss begin to heal.

On the other hand, the bright, dazzling light denies your loss. It illuminates the whole room, leaving no corner dark, but it is superficial and prevents healing. Sometimes, we may try to live in that light when we have suffered loss, or are living with depression: consider how many performers have been at their zaniest or funniest shortly before they've experienced a mental breakdown, or taken their own lives. They have been unwilling to face their loss and grief, their sense of worthlessness and despair, so they have denied it – at terrible cost – by living in that dazzling light – like spotlights on stage. However, if that light is extinguished, the wounds of grief are raw and unhealed, so the darkness of loss and depression may become unendurable.

When Jesus was born in that Bethlehem stable, he would have had only a small oil lamp to illuminate the room, yet he became a guiding light for us all. God provides us with a small, sure light to guide us on our way, but which gives us a shadowy space to encounter and come to terms with depression and loss, to find healing and a sure way forward. Nevertheless, that Light – the light of love – has the power to drive away darkness from our lives, for when we love and care for our neighbours, when we support one another, we build up God's kingdom and bring hope, even when bad news darkens our world. Just as burglars shy away from buildings with security lights, so love weakens the power of evil in our world. Christ asks us to share our love with our neighbours, for love begins in our hearts and if we trust in Jesus, love will truly transform our world by overcoming the darkness of hatred. Amen.

We are going to sing a carol set to “Scarlet Ribbons” by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. 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)

Let us come to God again in prayer.

Most gracious and loving God, on this Holy day, we pray for our world; for peace, harmony, good-health, fulfilment, prosperity and your blessing to be bestowed upon all peoples. Help us to amend our lives, so our hearts are a fitting home for the love of Jesus to dwell.

May your grace live in our hearts and may you bless the world, by guiding us along the pathway of mercy and justice. We pray for the sick, the poor, homeless, confused and lonely, as well as all who mourn loved ones, all of whose pain is the sharper as they mourn when most people are celebrating. Help us to support those for whom we pray, particularly those who are separated from loved ones because of this pandemic. In your mercy, Lord, reach out to comfort and strengthen them with the warm embrace of your love.

We pray for our churches, our families and friends. May all our hearts be filled with the love of our Saviour Jesus, so we find peace, pleasure, safety and fulfilment every day. May the light of our Saviour shine in our words and deeds, so we honour and glorify you in his beautiful name. Amen.

On Christmas Eve in 1818, the bellows of the organ at Oberndorf in Austria was damaged by mice, so the priest, Fr. Joseph Mohr gave organist Franz Gruber a poem he'd written and asked if he could write a tune for it that could be played on a guitar and sung the following morning by a choir of children. Not only did Herr Gruber do so, but it was heard by the organ-repairers and taken to Germany. It spread right across Europe and was sung by both British and German German soldiers during the Christmas Truce of 1914. Number 217, 'Silent night, holy night,'

1. Silent night! holy night!

All is calm, all is bright

'Round yon virgin mother and Child!

Holy Infant, so tender and mild,

Sleep in heavenly peace, / Sleep in heavenly peace.

**2. Silent night! holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight!
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heav'nly hosts sing Alleluia;
Christ, the Saviour, is born,
Christ, the Saviour, is born.**

**3. Silent night! holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.**

© Joseph Mohr (1792 – 1848)

*Our closing carol was written in 1972 by Valerie Collison, a medical secretary from Kent. We shall sing number 196, 'Come and join the celebration,'
Come and join the celebration,
It's a very special day;
Come and share our jubilation,
There's a new King born today!*

**1. See the shepherds hurry down to Bethlehem,
Gaze in wonder at the Son of God who lay before them: (Chorus)**

**2. Wise men journey, led to worship by a star,
Kneel in homage, bringing precious gifts from lands afar, so, (Chorus)**

**3. 'God is with us', round the world the message bring,
He is with us, 'Welcome', all the bells on earth are pealing: (Chorus)**

© Valerie Collison (born 1933)

Benediction

May the faith of Mary fill us; the steadfastness of Joseph strengthen us and the wonder of the shepherds warm our hearts this Christmas. May the joy of the angel host and the love of Christ-child live within us and bring us peace. And the blessing of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us now and forevermore. Amen.