

## **A Service for Christmas Day, 2023 (StF)**

### **Call to Worship: John chapter 1 verses 1 to 4**

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 all people. Amen.

*Our opening carol was written by an Irish bishop's wife with the unusual Christian name of Cecil. Family and friends called her Fanny! She wrote a number of hymns, including this one, to teach children at her Sunday School the essentials of our faith. Hymn number 214, 'Once in royal David's city'*

#### **1. Once in royal David's city**

**Stood a lowly cattle shed,  
Where a mother laid her baby,  
In a manger for his bed:  
Mary was that mother mild,  
Jesus Christ her little child.**

#### **2. He came down to earth from heaven**

**Who is God and Lord of all,  
And his shelter was a stable,  
And his cradle was a stall;  
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,  
Lived on earth our Saviour holy.**

#### **3. And, through all his wondrous childhood,**

**Day by day like us he grew;  
He was little, weak and helpless,  
Tears and smiles like us he knew;  
And he feeleth for our sadness,  
And he shareth in our gladness.**

#### **4. Still among the poor and lowly**

**Hope in Christ is brought to birth,  
With the promise of salvation  
For the nations of the earth;  
Still in him our life is found  
And our hope of heav'n is crowned.**

#### **5. And our eyes at last shall see him,**

**Through his own redeeming love;  
For that Child so dear and gentle  
Is our Lord in heav'n above:  
And he leads his children on  
To the place where he is gone.**

© Cecil Frances Alexander {1818 – 1895}

### **Let us pray.**

Amazing God, we have come to celebrate your boundless, constant love for people like us. You gave your beloved Son, Jesus, to our world as a helpless baby, born to ordinary parents in a stable because there was no room for him in a house or inn. You did not send him as a prince in a palace with servants to care for him and soldiers to protect him; nor did he sleep on a downy mattress in silken sheets. Instead, our Saviour slept on a bed of hay in a manger. It was your intention that Jesus should experience

our lives, know our happiness and woes, our pleasures and pain; to be Immanuel – God living with us. Heavenly Father, you gave him to the world, knowing that he must suffer and die to save us. Through him our sins are forgiven and death no longer has the final word. All glory and honour, power and praise are his alone, our Redeemer and Friend.

Often, we crowd Christ out of Christmas because of the pressures and pleasures of life. Nevertheless, let us make room for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives, for without him we are indeed hopeless. Forgive us for our failure to love you and one another and help us amend our ways. We know that through Christ alone our sins are forgiven and we receive a fresh start with you, our heavenly Father.

Gracious, loving God, as we thank you for all you have done throughout our lives, may we spread the Good News of your Salvation in all that we do and say. Help us to make time to serve you as you wish us to, so that, by serving and loving our neighbours, we may bring you honour, praise and glory in the wonderful name of Jesus Christ. 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.**

***Our second carol was written by John Byrom as a poem for his daughter, Dolly. The organist at the family's church composed the melody and it was sung at the family home at one minute past midnight on Christmas Day, 1750. Hymn number 195, 'Christians awake! Salute the happy morn,'***

**1. Christians, Awake, salute the happy morn,  
Whereon the Saviour of the world was born;  
Rise to adore the mystery of love,  
Which hosts of angels chanted from above;  
With them the joyful tidings first begun  
Of God incarnate and the Virgin's Son.**

**2. Then to the watchful shepherds it was told,  
Who heard the angelic herald's voice: "Behold,  
I bring good tidings of a Saviour's birth  
To you and all the nations on the earth:  
This day hath God fulfilled his promised word,  
This day is born a Saviour, Christ the Lord."**

**3. He spake; and straightway the celestial choir  
In hymns of joy, unknown before, conspire.  
The praises of redeeming love they sang,  
And heaven's whole orb with alleluias rang;  
God's highest glory was their anthem still,  
Peace on the earth, in ev'ry heart goodwill.**

**4. O may we keep and ponder in our mind  
God's wondrous love in saving lost mankind;  
Trace we the babe, who hath retrieved our loss,  
From his poor manger to his bitter cross;**

**Tread in his steps, assisted by his grace,  
Till our first heavenly state again takes place.**

**5. Then may we hope, the angelic hosts among,  
To sing, redeemed, a glad triumphal song;  
He that was born upon this joyful day  
Around us all his glory shall display;  
Saved by his love, incessant we shall sing  
Eternal praise to heaven's Almighty King.**

© John Byrom {1692 – 1763}

**The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 14**

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them,

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.”  
Amen.

*On Christmas Eve 1818, Franz Gruber, organist at St. Nicholas' Church, Oberndorf, told the priest that mice had gnawed holes in the leather bellows of the pipe organ and it would not work. Undaunted, the priest, Fr. Joseph Mohr, took out a piece of paper upon which he had written a poem, 'Stille nacht, heilige nacht' and asked his organist to compose a tune that could be played on a guitar and sung by the children in the choir. Franz managed not only to produce the melody, but rehearsed the children before it was sung at mass on Christmas morning. Organ repairers heard it sung when they came to mend the bellows, begged a copy – and the rest is history! Hymn 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.**

© J. Mohr (1792 – 1848) tr. J. Freeman Young (1820 – 1885)

**Address: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Luke 2:10**

If you were going to write a story about the greatest person ever to live, you would probably have him born to an influential, even royal family, in a palace where servants would attend to his every need and courtiers would be in attendance at his birth. St. Luke's account of the birth of Christ Jesus is almost the opposite, for the Son of God was born in an unimportant town a few miles from Jerusalem, in the stable of an inn – perhaps a cave used for sheltering animals – to a mother who was unmarried at the time of his nativity.

Why should God have chosen his Beloved Son to be born in such humble circumstances? When we love somebody, we make ourselves vulnerable in several ways: we can face rejection, even scorn when we declare our feelings; when we open our arms to embrace somebody, we expose ourselves to a push or blow if they don't share our feelings; we can be humiliated in front of our family or friends. Therefore, it takes a degree of courage to show our feelings to somebody else, yet God did precisely that two thousand years ago – and he does so, now!

Had Jesus been an earthly king, or very rich, he would have been remote from ordinary people like us, protected against life's hardships, probably unaware of the struggle most people face in life. Instead, he came into the world vulnerable and among ordinary people, just so he could share our experiences: our joys and sorrows, hopes and fears; pains and pleasures. Jesus is not only God in man, but God emptied out of all powers, except love. He is proof of Almighty God's boundless, everlasting love for human beings, where even the humblest is more valuable in the eyes of the Lord than gold, silver or precious gems.

The trials and tribulations of this past year remind us how much we need God's grace and guidance at a time when we feel helpless and oppressed, for despite all the gloom and suffering, here and abroad, we have seen many random acts of kindness, we celebrate the compassion NHS, care-workers and aid-workers and the self-giving love of foodbanks and their supporters. Christ is indeed with us, even if some of those who are doing his will aren't aware of his guiding light.

It is significant that in St. Luke's nativity story, the first witnesses were lowly shepherds – a class of people considered untrustworthy and inferior by most Jews – for God has a special place in his heart for outsiders in our society. Moreover, in Matthew's nativity account, the magi were gentiles – foreigners who Jews thought lay outside God's salvation, so Matthew showed that God cares for foreigners as well. Jesus came for all people, not a select few, and his salvation is on offer to everybody. His loving arms are ever open for us to come to him.

Like the shepherds, let us offer our adoration to the infant Messiah: unlike the Magi, we may have no precious gifts to offer Jesus, but the only thing he wants of us is

our hearts. Let us therefore offer the Christ-child our hearts in joyful, faithful service and let every day be a Christmas in our hearts. Amen.

*We continue with a carol by Christina Rossetti, a superb Victorian poetess, who produced two lovely carols, 'Love came down at Christmas' and 'In the bleak midwinter'. The last verse of the carol we are going to sing is a sermon in itself, so you are effectively getting two sermons in one service. Lucky you! Hymn number 204, '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 only his mother  
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.

© Christina Georgina Rossetti {1830 – 1894}

***Let us come to God again in prayer.***

Most gracious and loving God, on this Holy day, we pray for 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 within.

As we celebrate Christmas, we remember people affected by the effects of long – COVID, who may feel lonely or excluded, people who have lost their jobs, or are homeless, those struggling to make ends, or who are sick in body, mind or spirit. We pray for neighbours who mourn loved ones and whose pain is all the sharper when most people are celebrating at this time. Enable each of us to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we may provide practical support and friendship not just in this season, but always. May the people for whom we pray receive help to rebuild their broken lives. Come with your healing touch: grant all of them comfort and courage to journey from their distress to the peace and security you offer.

May you establish peace throughout the world, by leading us and our national leaders along the path of mercy and justice. Lord of all hear our plea for the wars in Ukraine and Palestine to end, with just resolutions to the disputes. Bless, inspire and protect all those who have striven to keep us safe in this year: the NHS, care workers, the armed services, police, fire and ambulance services.

We pray for the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide us, 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 coming and give us a longing to do your will. May our words and actions reveal the love of our Saviour to all-comers.

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.

*Our closing carol was written in Latin by James Wade, a Roman Catholic living in exile in Europe, because of his Jacobite views. It was translated by Frederick Oakley and remains a Christmas favourite in both English and Latin. Hymn number 212, ‘O come, all ye faithful’. We even get to sing the final verse, as it is Christmas Day. Alleluia!*

**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**

**4. Yea, Lord, we greet thee,  
Born this happy morning,  
Jesu, to thee be glory given;  
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing: Chorus © Frederick Oakeley (1832 – 1865)**

***Benediction.***

May the faithfulness of Mary, the steadfastness of Joseph, the wonder felt by the shepherds, the diligence 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.



**Wishing you a merry Christmas  
and a happy New Year**