

## A service for Christmas Day, 2022 (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.

*We shall begin with Isaac Watts' hymn, 'Joy to the world!' Number 77.*

#### 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.*

Amazing God, we have come to celebrate your boundless, constant love for everybody. 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, so all glory and honour, power and praise are his alone, our Redeemer and Friend.

Although we often crowd Christ out of Christmas because of the pressures and pleasures of life, 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 his wonderful name. 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.**

*At breakfast on Christmas Day 1749, Dolly Byrom found a scroll, bound with red ribbon, at her place on the table. When she opened the scroll, she found the words of “Christians, awake, salute the happy morn” a poem she had asked her father to write for her. I hope John Byrom bought her something else, young Dolly showed off the poem to friends and acquaintances, one of whom was John Wainwright, the organist at Stockport Parish Church where the Byroms worshipped. He must have been impressed, for he composed a tune for it and, at one minute past midnight on Christmas Day 1750, the Byrom household was roused from sleep by Mr. Wainwright and his choir singing “Christians, awake, salute the happy morn” outside their house. We shall sing 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, and unto men goodwill.**

**4. To Bethlem straight the enlightened shepherds ran,  
To see the wonder God had wrought for man;  
Then to their flocks, still praising God, return,  
And their glad hearts with holy rapture burn;  
Amazed, the wondrous tidings they proclaim,  
The first apostles of his infant fame.**

**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  
Th’ eternal praise of heaven’s Almighty King.**

© John Byrom {1692 – 1763}

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

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 pray for peace throughout the world, especially in Ukraine. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of those who govern the nations of the world, so they turn away from using violence as a means of having their own way.

Heavenly Father, we offer our prayer for victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and persecution. Bring an end to their suffering and help them rebuild their lives. Warm our hearts with your compassion, so we strive for them to receive the support they need to have a fresh start and hope for the future.

Loving Lord, we pray for the sick, the poor, homeless, confused and lonely, as well as all who mourn loved ones, whose pain is all the sharper when most people are celebrating at this time. Reach out to comfort and strengthen them throughout their difficulties. Help each of us to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we may provide practical support and friendship.

Bless and inspire your Church throughout the world. Help us set aside our divisions, so we may bear the light of good news to a sin-darkened world that so dearly needs enlightenment. May our words and actions reveal the love of our Saviour to all-comers.

Abba, Heavenly Father, fill our hearts with the love of our Saviour Jesus, so we find pleasure, safety and fulfilment day-by-day. Help us to be generous to both friend and stranger, welcoming them, just as Christ makes us welcome this Christmas. Grant that our families and friends find peace, joy and lasting friendships, too and may our lives reflect the love Jesus shares with us, so we live out the Gospel message and bring you glory in his holy name. Amen.

*Imagine that it is Christmas Eve when your organist announces that some distinctly unholy mice have gnawed holes in the leather bellows of the church organ. It is long before the age of electronic keyboards and all you have is a guitar. It dawns on you that you will have to conduct worship with that instrument when your congregation will be expecting the usual fare of carols. What do you do? If you were Father Joseph Mohr, you would persuade the organist to set to music a carol that you had written recently. Unlikely as it sounds, this is the origin of one of the best-loved Christmas Carols, 'Stille Nacht, Heilige Nact', or, depending upon the translation, 'Silent Night, Holy Night,' or 'Still the Night'.*

*Father Joseph was nonplussed for a moment only; then he pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket, on which he had written a poem that he had hoped to turn into a children's carol. With admirable faith, he handed it to Herr Gruber, his friend, and invited him to set it to music which could be accompanied upon the guitar and sung by children. Franz Gruber was a gifted, natural musician, but he must have been surprised how quickly the melody for 'Stille Nacht' came to him. Upon Christmas Day the two men and twelve children gave the maiden performance of the carol. We shall sing 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)*

**The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 20**

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."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,

"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Amen.

*Edward Caswall followed Dr. John Newman into the Roman Catholic Church in 1847, much to his family's disapproval. It must have been a shock to Edward's wife, too, but they remained together until she died in 1850, after which Edward left his home in Wiltshire to join John Newman at the Oratory, Edgbaston in Birmingham. There Edward worked with a dozen Catholic priests, serving churches, schools and communities in some of the poorest parts of Ladywood and*

*Hockley. The work of these priests among the slum-dwellers won them both respect and love – and not only from fellow-Catholics, for they visited the sick, took relief to the poor, visited prisoners at Winson Green Gaol and campaigned for better living conditions. Our carol, ‘See, amid the winter’s snow’ was published in “The Masque of Mary and other poems’ in 1858. We shall sing hymn number 215, ‘See, amid the winter’s snow’*

**1. See amid the winter’s snow,  
Born for us on earth below;  
See, the tender Lamb appears,  
Promised from eternal years: *Chorus:***

*Hail, thou ever-blessed morn,  
Hail, redemption’s happy dawn!  
Sing through all Jerusalem,  
Christ is born in Bethlehem.*

**2. Lo, within a manger lies  
He who built the starry skies;  
He, who, throned in heights sublime,  
Sits amid the cherubim: *Chorus:***

**3. Say, you holy shepherds, say,  
What your joyful news today?  
Wherefore have you left your sheep  
On the lonely mountain steep? *Chorus:***

**4. ‘As we watched at dead of night,  
There approached a wondrous light;  
Angels, singing peace on earth,  
Told us of the Saviour’s birth.’ *Chorus:***

**5. Sacred infant, all divine,  
What a tender love was thine,  
Thus to come from highest bliss  
Down to such a world as this: *Chorus:***

© Edward Caswall (1814 – 1878)

**Address:** *“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Luke 2:10*  
The Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke are remarkable not for the virgin birth, or presence of angels, but for the kinds of people who feature. During this Advent, the Methodist Church has run a programme call 'There is Room For.....' and considering people who are considered outsiders: the kind of people who might go to church for the first time at Christmas, just to see what it is all about; or others who might have stopped going to church long ago, but who feel they'd like to go again. They will consider themselves 'outsiders' and may be apprehensive about how they will be received. Of course, regular church-goers may feel uncomfortable about having 'outsiders' present during worship which could result in an unhappy experience for everybody.

If you were going to write a story about the greatest person whoever lived, 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. However, accounts of the birth of Christ Jesus are 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.

The characters in the Nativity stories include Mary, to all intents a young unmarried mother, although betrothed to Joseph. As such she could have been charged with adultery and, even if she escaped being stoned to death, she would have been ostracised by her community. As a young woman, she was very much a second-class citizen, without property rights, without a voice in her community, inexperienced and overlooked – yet God selected her to have the honour and responsibility of raising his Son.

Next are shepherds – a group of people who, although vital for the Judean economy, were considered untrustworthy and inferior by most Jews, because their work prevented them from observing the food and hygiene rules, so they were ceremonially unclean more often than not. Moreover, they were deemed dishonest, because they sometimes claimed other people's sheep as their own, so much so that a shepherd needed another man to corroborate his story in a Jewish court of law!

Of course, in Matthew we have the Magi, or wise men, who were Gentile astrologers and would have been despised by ordinary Jews, not just because they were foreign, but because astrology was prohibited by the Torah – Deuteronomy chapter 18. Jewish readers would have thought them as being beyond God's mercy, yet they read a message in the stars and they travelled a long distance to see their special new-born King.

Mary's betrothed, Joseph, was so poor he could only sacrifice two doves – the smallest offering allowed – when he presented Jesus at the temple while the Magi would have been wealthy, not only because of the gifts they offered Jesus, but because their journey would have cost them dearly.

Let's consider these characters: a young, unmarried, inexperienced mother; unclean, unreliable, even dishonest, lowly workmen; despised foreigners whose lifestyles were offensive to Jews; the wealthy and the poor. Too often such people are excluded from church life because of our social attitudes, yet in the birth narratives each group answered God's call and encountered the Christ-child, showing that God has a special place in his heart for outsiders in our society. Jesus came for all people, not a select few, and his salvation is on offer to everybody. His loving arms are ever open for each of us to come to him.

Like the shepherds, let us offer our adoration to the infant Messiah. While the wealthy are often criticised in the gospels, it is only those who won't use and share what the Lord has given them. Jesus did not condemn the generous rich. 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.

*Our penultimate carol is number 119 in "Hymns and Psalms". Its origins and authorship is uncertain, but it seems to have been written in the 1820s or 1830s. We sing, 'The first Nowell', following which we shall sing, 'O come, all ye faithful', number 212 in "Singing the Faith", because today we may sing the last verse legitimately!*

**1. The first Nowell the angels did say**

**Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;**

**In fields where they lay keeping their sheep,**

**On a cold winter's night that was so deep. *Chorus***

*Noel, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,  
Born is the King of Israel.*

2. They looked up and saw a Star  
Bright in the east beyond them far,  
And to the earth it gave great light,  
And so it continued both day and night. *Chorus*

3. And by the light of that same Star,  
Three Wise Men came from country far;  
To seek for a King was their intent,  
And to follow the Star wherever it went. *Chorus*

4. This star drew nigh to the north-west,  
O'er Bethlehem it took its rest,  
And there it did both stop and stay  
Above the place where Jesus lay. *Chorus*

5. Then entered in, those Wise Men three,  
Full rev'rently upon their knee,  
And offered there in His presence,  
Their gold, and myrrh, and frankincense. *Chorus*

6. Then let us all with one accord  
Sing praises to our heav'nly Lord,  
Who with the Father we adore  
And Blessed Spirit evermore. *Chorus*

*Anonymous*

*“O come, all ye faithful” first appeared in Latin form in an Eighteenth Century Jacobite manuscript, ‘A Prayer for James’. The James alluded to was probably James III, the ‘Old Pretender’ and the author is believed to have been John Francis Wade, a member of a colony of exiled Roman Catholics, living in Douai, France. Certainly, the manuscript is in Wade’s own hand. This Catholic colony had fled Britain after the enforced abdication of King James II in 1688 and it retained its British character until the late Eighteenth Century, when it was either assimilated in French society, or simply disintegrated. Jesuits are believed to have brought back the manuscript when they were allowed to return at the dawn of the Nineteenth Century. We conclude with 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. See how the shepherds,  
Summoned to his cradle,  
Leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;  
We too will thither  
Bend our joyful footsteps; *Chorus***

**4. Sing, choirs of angels,  
Sing in exultation,  
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;  
Glory to God  
In the highest; *Chorus***

**5. Yea, Lord, we greet thee  
Born this happy morning,  
Jesus, 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 joy of the angel host and the love given to the world in the Christ-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.