

A service for Epiphany: 3rd January, 2021 (StF)

Call to worship: Isaiah chapter 60 verses 1 to 3

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Amen.

Our first hymn was written by Revd. Tim Hughes, who was a former Director of Worship at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton before being appointed of St. Luke's, Gas Street, Birmingham. Although intended as an Advent hymn, 'Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,' is also excellent to open worship. We shall sing hymn number 175.

1. Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,

Opened my eyes, let me see

Beauty that made this heart adore you,

Hope of a life spent with you. Chorus:

So here I am to worship,

Here I am to bow down,

Here I am to say that you're my God,

And you're altogether lovely, altogether worthy,

Altogether wonderful to me.

2. King of all days, oh so highly exalted,

Glorious in heaven above.

Humbly you came to the earth you created,

All for love's sake became poor. Chorus:

3. And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross.

And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross..... Chorus:

© Tim Hughes

Let us pray.

Eternal God, Lord of Creation whose Word gave life to this world and everything that lives on it, you have revealed your glory when the Word became incarnate as your Son, Jesus. Amazing God, you gave your beloved Son, Christ 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, for it was your intention that Jesus should experience our lives and know us intimately. He came as Immanuel – God with us and among us. Amazing Heavenly Father, you gave him to the world even though you knew that he would suffer and die to save us from the powers of sin and death.

Merciful God, although the pressures and pleasures of life threaten to crowd him out, help us make room for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives, for without him we are indeed hopeless. As we thank you for all you have done for us and given to us throughout our lives, we confess that we have sinned against you and have disobeyed your command to love. Forgive us for the sake of your dear Son, Christ Jesus, who became like us, so that we might become like him.

Heavenly Father, you hear and answer our prayers and we believe you have forgiven us already. May we respond to your grace by serving you as you call us to, as true witnesses to your self-giving love in the world through Jesus Christ our Lord who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and evermore. Amen.

We shall 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 next hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Many of their hymns are set to old Scots ballad tunes, but this is sung to "Scarlet Ribbons". 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 amazing God, at the beginning of a New Year with all its promises and challenges, hear our prayer for our world and all its peoples that we may recover from the brokenness of this pandemic and its effect on the economies of our world.

Help us to play our part in your healing.

Unlooked for, Christ comes. To shepherds, watching their sheep through the long, dark night, he comes with the glory of the angels' song and in the humility of the manger.

Loving God, we pray for our community: 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 love for our neighbours. In the midst of our everyday lives, surprise us with glimpses of the glorious, humble love at the heart of existence.

Searched for, Christ comes. To the wise and powerful, star-led to Bethlehem, seeking a king, he comes, child of Mary, crowned with meekness, worthy of every gift.

Loving God, we pray for the leaders of the world they 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 their leaders will seek mercy and justice in their dealings. Remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism and oppression, that they may be helped to find healing in body, mind and spirit. Guide our leaders and us with your light to the true wisdom of justice and peace, of freedom and respect for every human life.

Longed for, Christ comes. To Anna and Simeon, whose days are lived in faithful expectation, he comes, a new life to the old, a living prophecy of hope. 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 begin a 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.

Prayed for, Christ comes. To men and women, girls and boys, crying out in darkness, pain and loneliness, he comes, baptized, at one with us, our Saviour, healer and friend. 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 ask you to bring them hope and healing. We remember people who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers, asking 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 know 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.

Unlooked for and searched for, longed for and prayed for, Abba, loving God, you come to us now as you have come to your people in every age. We thank you for all who have reflected the light of Christ. Help us to follow their example and bring us with them to eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Reginald Heber, Bishop of Calcutta between 1822 and his premature death in 1826. His See ranged from Sri Lanka to Australia and

New Zealand, so it is understandable how he came to work himself to death. Nevertheless, he gave us a number of lovely hymns. 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}*

Our Epistle is Paul's Letter to the Ephesians chapter 3 verses 1 to 12

For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 to 12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked,

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said,

"Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Amen.

We shall continue our worship as we sing a carol by Christina Georgina Rossetti, who also wrote 'In the bleak midwinter'. In twelve lines she gave us the reason for Christmas: "Love came down at Christmas". See how 'love' is repeated eleven times in this carol. Let us sing hymn number 210, 'Love came down at Christmas'.

1. Love came down at Christmas,

**Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign.**

**2. Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, love divine;
Worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign.**

**3. Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all the world,
Love for plea and gift and sign.**

© Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830 – 1894)

Sermon: *"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you."* Is. 60:1
Several years ago, I heard the Nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke described as 'fairy stories' and I felt a flash of irritation, not because I am convinced that they are historical accounts, but because they certainly are not fairy stories, rather they are 'teaching stories' in the rabbinical style. Just as the account of Job is not intended as a literal account, but a way of explaining the randomness of suffering, especially of the faithful, so the tales of the shepherds and the magi have important messages for Christians today, just as they did two thousand years ago.

The openings of Matthew and Luke are highly symbolic. Matthew's visitors 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. In the eyes of most Jews they were doubly damned – as far away from God's grace as anybody could be, not only as Gentiles, but as heinous sinners. Luke's shepherds were also despised by respectable Jews, even though sheep were a vital part of the Judean economy and

King David himself had once been a shepherd. Shepherds could neither observe the food nor the hygiene laws when they were with their sheep, so they were considered ceremonially unclean and needed to be cleansed by a priest before they could worship in synagogue or the temple. {They were also unable to give evidence independently in a court of law, for shepherds' honesty was brought into question as a result of the habit of claiming other shepherds' sheep as their own}. However, despite the low regard in which both the magi and shepherds were held by the Jews, God first revealed the infant Jesus to them, not to King Herod, nor High Priests like Annas. The Jewish hierarchy did not see the Messiah first, as they had expected. Instead, outsiders, the lowly, sinful and marginalized received that blessing, so God's kingdom stands traditional values on their heads and gives us all hope.

While John Henry Hopkins' carol, "We three kings of orient are" is responsible for many Christmas cards depicting three oriental gentlemen on camels as they plod their way towards Bethlehem, there is no evidence in the Bible that they were kings, nor that their names were Caspar, Melchior or Balthazar, nor, even that there were only three men. Indeed, I think it is unlikely that three Magi, an order of astrologers, would have travelled for up to two years in 'bandit country' – even on Roman roads – without an entourage or guard of some kind, in their quest for a 'new-born king'.

The magi, or wise men, were unfamiliar with the Jewish faith, yet when they reached Jerusalem, they found Herod and his advisers unaware of the birth of the Messiah. Their enquiry about 'one born king of the Jews' caused a real storm. Far from welcoming a child who scriptures said would grow to re-establish a close relationship between God and his people, Herod and his court saw the infant as a threat to his power. There is deliberate irony that the Jews in Jerusalem, who had been waiting for more than seven hundred years for the Messiah, were blinded by their prejudices against the infant Jesus, yet they considered themselves 'God's chosen people'. No one, not even the high priests, asked to accompany the magi, so they could see and worship the baby, yet in Matthew's words, the wise men 'saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.'

The gifts are significant, for gold showed he would be a king (though not in earthly terms). Frankincense indicated he would be holy, while myrrh foretold his death. It is also worth noting that the magi found Mary and Jesus living in a house, not the stable, so it is reasonable to suggest that Jesus may have been up to eighteen months old and the magi were rather late for the celebration! It is clear that if the magi had understood the Jewish faith, they would not have asked Herod their question about the new king and the lives of baby boys might have been saved, always assuming that the Massacre of the Innocents was an historical event. It is remarkable that the birth of a baby in Bethlehem may have led Herod the Great to order all male infants of two or less to be slaughtered by his troops though, as Bethlehem was a small town, it is likely the victims of the massacre numbered between twenty and two dozen, not that it would have been any consolation to their bereaved parents. There is no historical document of such an event, but it that is hardly surprising, for I imagine that the King would hardly want it publicised. However, such ruthlessness is plausible, as Herod was responsible for the murders of one of his wives and three sons: a few peasant children would have meant nothing to him.

The nativity stories challenge us to be open to God's call, to make ourselves available to him, as did the wise men and shepherds, not to be blinded by our preconceptions about who or what the Messiah should be. Unlike the magi, we do know

about Jesus as King of kings, who became the one perfect sacrifice to defeat sin and death, freeing us to serve God because we love him and are loved by him – rather than having to try to win his favour.

Therefore, despite all the trials and tribulations of last year, let us face 2021 with confidence and joy, for Jesus is with us every step of life's journey. Let us make ourselves available to hear and answer God's call and God grant us the persistence of the magi, if the going becomes tough, or we find ourselves becoming disheartened. We must not forget the love God has for the fallen, lowly and marginalised, for we neglect their well-being at our peril. My friends we have seen a Light – the inextinguishable light of God's love in Jesus – so let us reflect it in words and deeds upon the people we meet day by day, in order that we carry the light of God's love to the darker corners of our world in his holy name. Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn by James Montgomery, a radical newspaper proprietor in Sheffield, a fierce campaigner against boy chimney sweeps who had to climb up chimneys to sweep them and a committed opponent of slavery long before William Wilberforce's campaign. We shall sing hymn number 228, 'Hail to the Lord's anointed,'

- 1. Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
Great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
His reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
To set the captives free,
To take away transgression
And rule in equity.**
- 2. He comes, with succour speedy,
To those who suffer wrong;
To help the poor and needy,
And bid the weak be strong;
To give them songs for sighing,
Their darkness turn to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying,
Were precious in his sight.**
- 3. He shall come down like showers
Upon the fruitful earth;
Love, joy and hope, like flowers,
Spring in his path to birth;
Before him, on the mountains,
Shall peace the herald go;
And righteousness, in fountains,
From hill to valley flow.**
- 4. Kings shall fall down before him
And gold and incense bring;
All nations shall adore him,
His praise all people sing;
To him shall prayer unceasing
And daily vows ascend,**

**His kingdom still increasing,
A kingdom without end.**

**5. O'er every foe victorious,
He on his throne shall rest;
From age to age more glorious,
All-blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never
His covenant remove;
His name shall stand for ever,
His changeless name of Love.**

© *James Montgomery (1771 – 1854)*

Benediction

May the trust of the Virgin 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 our Friend and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen.