

## 211225 St John's Christmas Day Service prepared by Rev Adele Moorhouse

Welcome as you join in worship with St John's Church on this Christmas Day.

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). Matthew 1:23 NIV

As we celebrate the birth of Immanuel, we light the candle representing Jesus (you may wish to light your own candle at this point).

Lord Jesus, Light of light  
you have come among us.  
Help us who live by your light  
to shine as lights in your world.  
Glory to God in the highest. Amen

### Song

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;  
*O come, let us adore him,  
O come, let us adore him,  
O come, let us adore him,  
Christ the Lord!*

God of God,  
Light of light,  
Lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb;  
Very God,  
Begotten, not created:  
*O come, let us...*

*Sing, choirs of angels,  
Sing in exultation,  
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;  
Glory to God  
In the highest:  
O come, let us...*

Yea, Lord, we greet thee,  
Born this happy morning,  
Jesus, to thee be glory given;  
Word of the Father  
Now in flesh appearing:  
*O come, let us...*

*Anonymous Latin,  
Tr. Frederic Oakley (1802-80)*

**Prayer** We thank you loving God for the good news of your love for us - that you love us so much that you sent your son to be born as a baby in Bethlehem, to live amongst us and then to die and rise again so that we can enjoy the promise of eternal life. We come with a whole range of emotions today, for all sorts of reasons - (pause and call to mind our own thoughts and feelings) - thank you that you understand and that you welcome us just as we are. We pray that we would all feel your peace and the certainty of your presence with us today in our worship and in our celebrations. We ask our prayer in Jesus' name. **Amen**

### Reading Isaiah 9:2-7 NIV

The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.  
You have enlarged the nation  
and increased their joy;

they rejoice before you  
as people rejoice at the harvest,  
as warriors rejoice  
when dividing the plunder.  
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,  
you have shattered  
the yoke that burdens them,  
the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor.  
Every warrior's boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,  
will be fuel for the fire.  
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 greatness 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.

### **Song**

See, amid the winter's snow,  
Born for us on earth below,  
See, the Lamb of God appears,  
Promised from eternal years.

*Hail, thou ever-blessed morn!  
Hail, redemption's happy dawn!  
Song through all Jerusalem:  
Christ is born in Bethlehem!*

Lo, within a manger lies  
He who built the starry skies,  
He who throned in height sublime  
Sits amid the cherubim.

Say, ye holy shepherds, say,  
What your joyful news today;

Wherefore have ye left your sheep  
On the lonely mountain steep?

'As we watched at dead of night,  
Lo, we saw a wondrous light:  
Angels singing, 'Peace on earth'  
Told us of the Saviour's birth.'

Sacred Infant, all divine,  
What a tender love was Thine,  
Thus to come from highest bliss  
Down to such a world as this!

Teach, O teach us, holy Child,  
By Thy face so meek and mild,  
Teach us to resemble Thee  
In Thy sweet humility.

Edward Caswall (1814-78)

The 'great light' that God promised (in the Isaiah reading) was fulfilled through the birth of Jesus. It would bring great joy to everyone – this was the message of the angels to those shepherds in Bethlehem.

### **Reading** Luke 2:8-16

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 that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, 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 heaven,  
and on earth peace to those 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.

### **Song**

While shepherds watched their flocks by  
night,  
All seated on the ground,  
The angel of the Lord came down  
And glory shone around.

'Fear not,' said he, for mighty dread  
Had seized their troubled mind;  
'Glad tidings of great joy I bring  
To you and all mankind.

'To you in David's town this day  
Is born of David's line  
A Saviour, who is Christ the Lord,  
And this shall be the sign.

'The heavenly babe you there shall find  
To human view displayed,  
All meanly warped in swaddling bands,  
And in a manger laid.'

Thus spake the seraph; and forthwith  
Appeared a shining throng  
Of angels, praising God, who thus  
Addressed their joyful song:

'All glory be to God on high  
And on the earth be peace;  
Goodwill henceforth from heaven to men  
Begin and never cease.'

Nahum Tate (1652-1715)

### **Talk**

Did you know that Christmas can be a rather dangerous time? We are warned about some things - 'Don't drink and drive'; 'make sure the turkey is cooked properly'; even 'beware of paper cuts from over enthusiastic present opening'! And of course this year we are warned of the very real dangers of mixing too freely with others and risking the further spread of Covid. As far as I'm aware there is no such warning about the danger of over-sentimentalising the Christmas story - or of pushing Jesus out of the celebrations altogether, and yet this is surely the greatest risk of all.

If Christmas cards do show a nativity scene (not many do these days), it will invariably show a pristine manger with sparkling yellow hay. Jesus looking squeaky clean, wrapped in perfectly white cloths, and Mary and Joseph looking as though they have just plucked their favourite outfits from a nearby wardrobe. The reality would of course have been nothing like this at all. You have only to approach even the cleanest of farmyards to know

that where there are animals there is also dust, dirt and very often a rather pungent smell. Mary and Joseph would have no doubt been rather grimy from their long journey with no access to a nice hot bath, nor even running water. At his birth, their son would have been wiped with a rag before being laid in the only relatively clean space - the animals' feeding trough.

Jesus was to be found, not in the perfumed sheets of the privileged, but in the dirt and poverty and mess of everyday life.

'Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

The prophet Isaiah had made amazing claims about this tiny child in the hay - '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.'

We could view the mess of the stable as representing the mess of our world - the grime in fact a visualisation of the injustice, greed, conflict, hunger, poverty, loneliness and longing experienced by so many. Jesus did not avoid such things but became part of it all, lying right there in the midst of it. And we should not lose sight of the words the angel spoke to the shepherds on that first Christmas night, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for *all* the people." Jesus is still here, right in the midst of all that causes pain and suffering in this world, promising transformation and ultimately, great joy for *all* people.

The names given to Immanuel assure us that God is in fact with us in every situation. Whenever we are not sure what to do, or what to think, we have a Wonderful Counsellor to advise and to guide; If we feel overwhelmed and vulnerable, in need of help and unable to change the situation around us, then we remember that we have a Mighty God for whom nothing is impossible; If ever we are heartbroken, despairing, frightened, or feeling unloved, then we can know the comfort and protection of our Everlasting Father; and in situations where relationships are strained, families torn apart, and when we long to see an end to fighting and unrest around the world, then we can turn to the Prince of Peace.

'For a child has been born for us, a son given to us, authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' Today, we celebrate the fact that Isaiah's prophecy has been fulfilled. Isaiah also said, 'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.'

Today we are reminded that we can trust God. I don't think we've ever needed to hear it more than we do in this present time. We are reminded that the story is true and can be trusted and we can know the reality of this birth in our lives and in our world.

We need to be reminded of this truth because we have walked in darkness - because we have lived in a land of deep darkness - we have known times when our lives were overshadowed by the feeling of impossibility and we ache to hear some good news of great joy, not just for ourselves but for all people.

People walk in the darkness of covid - fearful, uncertain, anxious.

People live in the darkness of grief, loss and sorrow - the names and faces of family and friends we long for running through our minds constantly and particularly today.

People experience the darkness in all sorts of ways.

We desperately want to hear good news of great joy for all people, all nations, all faiths, all circumstances.

Every one of us has experienced darkness in some form and every one of us has longed to hear that good news of great joy. Well, amidst the tinsel and the trappings, there in the midst of the messy reality of life, is that good news. 'Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.'

When we bring all the darkness, loneliness and chaos to the baby in the manger who is Christ the Lord, we can know that:

The manger of distress is filled with the Light of Life.

The manger of confusion and self-doubt is filled with the Wonderful Counsellor.

The manger of weakness and impossibility cradles the Mighty God.

The manger of loneliness and longing is filled with the Eternal Father.

The manger of chaos and conflict holds the Prince of Peace.

The manger of guilt and regret is filled with the Merciful One.

The manger of fear and lostness is filled with the Good Shepherd.

The manger of hunger and poverty holds the Bread of Life.

The manger of longing holds the Cup of Salvation.

The manger of our humanity now cradles God.

The manger in Bethlehem holds the creator of us all, and through his manger we, and every aspect of our lives is cradled in him. Today the Saviour is here, and by his birth we can be made new, reborn and recreated.

If this is hard for you to take hold of at the moment, then simply know this truth - Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. And that is good news of great joy for all people. Amen

### **Prayer**

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Word of God, let us pray with thankful hearts.

The bells and lights and presents and decorations in church and in our homes express our thanks to you, Lord, for coming into the world in person.

On this Christmas Day we want to say: **Thank you, holy God!**

The world Jesus was born into was the world we know. Thank you for being prepared to face the dangers and risks of human mistakes and sin in order to save us.

On this Christmas Day we want to say: **Thank you, holy God!**

We remember those who find Christmas a sad or lonely season; we remember those for whom it brings to the surface memories, anxieties or dangers. Through good and difficult times you are always with us.

On this Christmas Day we want to say: **Thank you, holy God!**

We remember those whose loved ones have died, and all those who have finished with earthly celebrations. May they celebrate with you and all the angels of heaven.

On this Christmas Day we want to say: **Thank you, holy God!**

For all the many blessings of this past year and for all the good that you have enabled us to do; for the experiences that have taught us humility and patience, we thank you.

On this Christmas Day we want to say: **Thank you, holy God!**

God we thank you that your love caused you to be born as one of us, and that on this Christmas Day we can declare with confidence: '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.' **Amen**

Adapted from a prayer by Susan Sayers in 'Living Stones' © 1998

We have spoken of the darkness in our world, but today we also recognise the good news of great joy - Jesus the Light of the World has come! Joy to the world!

### **Song**

Joy to the world! the Lord has 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!

Joy to the earth! the Saviour reigns;  
Your sweetest songs employ.  
While fields and streams and hills and  
plains

Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy!

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of his righteousness,  
The wonders of his love,  
The wonders of his love,  
The wonders, the wonders of his love.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

### **Blessing**

As the people who walked in darkness saw a great light, may we live in your light. As that light gave them joy and hope, give us the joy and hope that comes from knowing you. And as we take your light, joy and hope into our homes, and our communities this Christmas, may we know your love and your peace. Amen