

Worship for Home St. John's 27 December 2020

Introduction

As I write it is still before Christmas, but this is for the first Sunday of Christmas. As you read this, Christmas day will have been and gone, but it is still Christmas! I have included some traditional Carols, ones I believe we have not had at other services, and I hope they help you to continue in the true Christmas spirit. I have chosen to use the lectionary Gospel reading (Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple and meet Simeon and Anna) which I believe has many relevant themes in these times. I have also included the opening of John's Gospel as our opening words and a canticle (a piece of scripture used as a Psalm or hymn) and my favourite Christmas Hymn that all speak of God's coming into the world in humility as one of us.

If you have a candle you might like to light it and think of the light of the world that has come and keep a moments quiet before beginning to read the service.

Opening Words (John 1.1-5 and 14) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

The Carol, *Angels from the realms of glory*

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|---|--|
| 1 Angels, from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth ;
you who sang creation's story,
now proclaim Messiah's birth :
<i>Come and worship,
Christ the new-born King,
come and worship,
worship Christ, the new-born King.</i> | 4 Saints before the altar bending,
watching long in hope and fear,
suddenly the Lord, descending,
in his temple shall appear : |
| 2 Shepherds in the field abiding,
watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing,
yonder shines the infant Light : | 5 Though an infant now we view him,
he shall fill his Father's throne,
gather all the nations to him ;
every knee shall then bow down : |

vv. 1-4 James Montgomery (1771–1854)
v. 5, unascribed text in *The Christmas Box*, 1825
Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition,
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Opening Prayer

Let us all, here, young and old,
be like Anna and Simeon – nurtured in the place of prayer, and looking to the world for the signs of God's presence;
And like Mary and Joseph - on the pilgrimage of faith to Jerusalem,
come on a pilgrimage of faith today, to this place (be that our own homes or wherever) of worship.
Held together by this beloved truth, we turn **together** (though in different places and may be at different times) to
worship the one who calls us all in prayer and practice towards the works of love.

Amen.

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

You, God, are seen in the flourishing of nature – everywhere, everywhere, everywhere. We thank you for farmers,
fields and fruit. We thank you for sun and rain. We honour this earth and its glorious creation, and the wisdom of
nurture that has come from generations and generations of people who have tilled the earth – as you have told us.

Amen.

A prayer of confession

The heavens and seas proclaim your glory. But we have polluted the skies and clogged the seas. Young and old
together show the beauty of God. But we have made idols of youth and made age seem shameful.

Forgive us, God, for our sins against the earth and our sins against each other.
We move – through age and aeons – in the one direction: towards your love.
Forgive us, God, for making idols of the things that change, and ignoring what does not change.

If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, you are faithful and just and will forgive us. **Thanks be to God. Amen.**

Collect for the First Sunday of Christmas

God of glory, who wonderfully created us in your own image and yet more wonderfully restored us in your Son Jesus Christ; grant that, as he came to share our humanity, so we may share in the life of his divinity; who is a live and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

A Canticle A SONG OF CHRIST'S GLORY (from Philippians 2) (Where there are a number of people present you might like to have use the lighter and the darker type to say this responsively)

- 1 **Christ Jesus was in the form of God,
but he did not cling to equality with God.**
- 2 **He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,
and was born in our human likeness.**
- 3 **Being found in human form he humbled himself,
and became obedient unto death, even death on a
cross.**
- 4 **Therefore God has highly exalted him,
and bestowed on him the name above every name,**
- 5 **That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth ;**

**6 And every tongue confess that Jesus
Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the
Father.**

Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit ;
**as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.**

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Gospel Reading Luke 2.22-40 Luke has given the account of Jesus birth and now takes us to what follows.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Reflection

Let us pray.

God of those who wait patiently and God of those who want to see your Kingdom come and above all God who comes as one of us, we thank you for this reading and we ask the help of your Spirit in our understanding of it and applying it to our lives. And now may the words I write and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God who comes to us that we might come to you. Amen.

Have you been able to see the windows in St. John's during the advent period? (At the time of writing) I have seen them only in the daylight and in the pictures that have been shared on line. The St. John's Advent calendar has rather taken me back to those of my youth; they had scriptural passages and images behind the windows (not chocolate). There was an expectation -What was the picture going to be today? What part of the story was going to be revealed? We couldn't wait to open the window and yet we had to wait (I must confess I think there were times I took a sneaky preview, lightly slipping the perforations of the window and hardly bending it back to see inside and setting back in place for the big reveal on the proper day). I still try and hold Advent as a waiting time and not to celebrate Christmas too soon but then to celebrate Christmas not just on Christmas day but for the whole of the Christmas period.

Waiting is an Advent theme, but today's Christmas reading is also about those who were waiting; it is about the right time too, and it is about how God responds **in time**, in the very midst of ordinary life in the most extraordinary way – Emanuel, God with us!

Luke mentions rather quickly two different ceremonies (actually there is a third in the verse just prior to our reading) that take place at the birth of the first born male. The first born male was to be given to God (Ex. 13.2) and so there had developed a ceremony for redeeming the child (Num. 18.16). Mary would have been considered ritually unclean after the birth (Lev. 12) and there was a sacrifice required for her purification –that is why they go to the temple. There is an important detail here; we are told the sacrifice was of two pigeons. Actually the law required a pigeon and a lamb. This was extremely expensive and so the second pigeon could be substituted in the case of the poor. Once again we see not simply the ordinary but the extremely humble setting into which God comes to us.

As they come to the temple to make the required sacrifice they meet two ordinary and yet extraordinary old people. Take a look through Luke's Gospel and see which characters are actually given names –there are not many. Simeon and Anna are named. These are significant figures. They are old and they in slightly different ways have been patiently and yet urgently waiting for the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel, and through Israel to the whole world. There were those who expected a political revolution in which God's anointed would overthrow the Romans and install Israel in its rightful place. That was not Simeon's expectation. Yes, he was waiting for God's intervention 'the comfort' for Israel but that would be a light to the Gentiles too, not a domination of them.

In the shortest of the three hymns (or canticle's), the Nunc Dimittis, that Luke gives us in these early chapters (the others are the Magnificat, Mary's song, which Annie spoke about last week and Zechariah's song, the Benedictus) Simeon succinctly expresses the promises he sees fulfilled in this little child, and he is content; he does not need to see the working out of God's plan. Now he may 'go in peace'. But that is not all he says. There is suffering and there is division. This is hard for Mary and Joseph to hear but it is an inevitable part of the way of God amongst us. If God is truly to respond to the suffering of the world then it is God's plan to be in the midst of that suffering. This child will cause people to make a decision one way or the other and many will fall as well as those who will rise.

Anna too has been waiting and worshipping. She is not just named, she is given the full description (albeit patriarchal). She is a full real person. She has known sorrow, but has not been bitter. She has waited and worshipped rather than grown bitter. She is a prophet and a resource in prayer to those who do not think they have time to pray and do not even know that she is praying. She speaks not so much to the parents as Simeon had, but rather praises God for the Child and speaks to any who will listen (and perhaps to those who won't, that is their problem, not hers).

How have you waited through these difficult times of COVID? How have you responded to the changing circumstances around Christmas? Have you become bitter? Or have you in the midst of the suffering, waited patiently and yet earnestly; have you prayed and praised? There is no sense that Simeon and Anna judged those who

had not waited patiently like them but rather they are an example to us of how with God's grace we may behave. So if you have felt yourself being bitter and resentful, don't add to those feelings by being guilty for them. No, rejoice as Anna rejoices, see as Simeon and Anna see the coming of God's way in the little Child, Jesus, even if they (and we) can not see how it all works out.

Do not however, imagine that all is now plain sailing. The Christmas story is often seen as a rather beautiful somewhat sanitised affair but there is hardship, poverty and suffering throughout it. God comes into the real world and deals with the real world. Today (that is when you read this, 27th December) is the feast of St. John the Evangelist, our patron saint. Tradition has it that he, like Anna and Simeon, had a long and faithful life (in John's Gospel, we hear Jesus say to Peter, 'what is it to you if he remains until I come?' traditionally thought to be a reference to John). However, yesterday, (Boxing Day to the secular world) is St. Stephen's day and tomorrow is Holy Innocents day. The Holy innocents were the young children killed by Herod for fear of the infant Jesus. Stephen of course was martyred. It is not for us to know if we will suffer personally, be called to be knowing witnesses and suffer for that, or be granted long and faithful lives. Simeon sees that the way of God in Jesus is in the midst of suffering and Anna had known suffering but remained faithful. The light that has come in to the World is not overcome by the darkness; it is the darkness that is overcome by the Light, but that is through the way of the cross.

A final thought –how do you perceive old age –your own or others? Is it just a burden or a worry? What do Anna and Simeon teach us about valuing age? What do they teach us about recognising different gifts at different times in our lives? Are you so busy that you need an Anna to pray for you (both for your needs and also because you don't think you have the time to pray yourself) and are you aware of such people and grateful for them? Are you an Anna, who despite personal suffering prays and praises continually? Do we value the insights of the Simeons and Annas around us –do we even listen? Are we content that there comes a time when it is not just OK but good to say, 'aster, now you are dismissing your servant in peace.'

Amen.

Silence

Charles Wesley's great hymn of the incarnation, *Let earth and heaven combine*.

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|---|---|
| 1 Let earth and heaven combine,
angels and all agree,
to praise in songs divine
the incarnate Deity,
our God contracted to a span,
incomprehensibly made man. | 4 He deigns in flesh to appear,
widest extremes to join ;
to bring our vileness near,
and make us all divine :
and we the life of God shall know,
for God is manifest below. |
| 2 He laid his glory by,
he wrapped him in our clay ;
unmarked by human eye,
the latent Godhead lay ;
infant of days he here became,
and bore the mild Immanuel's name. | 5 Made perfect first in love,
and sanctified by grace,
we shall from earth remove,
and see his glorious face :
his love shall then be fully showed,
and we shall all be lost in God. |
| 3 Unsearchable the love
that has the Saviour brought ;
the grace is far above
both earth's and angels' thought :
suffice for us that God, we know,
our God, is manifest below. | Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

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Prayers of intercession

(Oddly, it is the prayers that I find hardest to prepare in advance. Please use these words to come to God in prayer but also use the space created to bring other concerns to God; bring what you are thankful for; bring your concerns for the wider world –health, political and civil unrest, the climate; bring your requests for the more immediate communities and for those known personally to you; and bring your own needs.)

Let us pray

Today we honour Simeon and Anna. Old, both, they had a light that sustained them. They both held strongly to what they knew they hoped for. May we – people of all ages – be held together by what sustains us. Whether seven or seventy, may we know what is most important.

God in your mercy, hear us.

Today we honour all shapes of families. Families by choice, families by adoption, families by birth, families in grief, families in multiple homes, families in negotiation, families in care, families in support. In all shapes of family, may we find words of love and kindness.

God in your mercy, hear us.

Today we pray for people who are ignored because of their age. In an era where youth and beauty are praised, we have so often ignored wisdom, experience, longstanding faithfulness and perspective. For all who have felt overlooked, for all who have love and wisdom to share, we pray.

God in your mercy, hear us.

The Carol *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 Heaven cannot hold him,
nor the earth sustain ;
heav'n and earth shall flee away
when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter
a stable-place sufficed
God, the Lord Almighty,
Jesus Christ.

3 Angels and archangels
may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim
throngèd the air —
but his mother only,
in her maiden bliss,
worshippèd the Belovèd
with a kiss.

4 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.

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Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830–1894)

A sending out prayer

Lord, your faithful servants Anna and Simeon
had dreams and visions that sustained them into their old age.
Enrich us all with visions and dreams that sustain us, from one decade to the next;
so that our eyes might always be bright, with the life that we see all around.
Send us out, today and all days,
with this love, and this vocation.

Amen.

And the blessing of God, the Mother and Father of us all, of God, Emmanuel –God with us, and of God the indwelling Holy Spirit, be with us all now, as we wait and live, and in life everlasting. Amen!

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