

Worship for the Sunday after Christmas 2020

Comfort and joy

Welcome to worship on this Sunday after Christmas, a Sunday when we cannot all gather in one place as we had planned, but when our congregations can be together in the Spirit and in rejoicing in the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Our readings for today are joyful ones, so I've chosen some joyful carols which I hope will bring tidings of comfort and joy. I only wish we had time for more carols and could all sing together.

If you are worshipping by reading this, I hope you can sing the carols at home or have a recording to listen to.

Call to worship: Light of life, you came in flesh, born into human pain and joy, and gave us power to be your children. Grant us faith, O Christ, to see your presence among us, so that all of creation may sing new songs of gladness and walk in the way of peace.

The first carol is *Unto us a boy is born*

Let us pray: Gracious God, we want to praise you for your faithfulness at Christmas, that a child was born, a son was given and his name is Emmanuel, God with us. Thank you that we have been able to worship him with shepherds and wise men as the saviour of the world. Thank you also for your faithfulness over this last difficult year, that you are with us in good times and bad.

Forgive us if over this Christmas season we have lost the spirit of Christmas. Forgive us if stress or financial pressure or fear have meant that we have not always shown love and good will to all. Forgive us if, fortunate to have family and money and health, we have ignored those who are poor, lonely or sick. Forgive us if, during this past year we have forgotten whose we are and whom we serve. Forgive us if, by what we have said or done we have failed to live as our Heavenly Father calls us to live.

We bless you that the baby that was born was called Jesus and that he came to save the world. We claim that promise now: cleanse, restore and renew us that we may walk in your light and gladly do your will. Help us

at the end of this year never to forget that in Christ you are one of us, one for us, and one with us. Help us to take Christ with us into the year that lies ahead and to live for your praise and glory. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen

Our first Bible reading from Galatians speaks of our adoption as children of God. *Galatians 4:4-7*

Reflection

This Christmas in particular is a good time to remember how unrealistic the more sentimental Christmas cards are in their pictures of the nativity. Jesus' birth certainly wasn't like that—no men allowed, for one thing, so we have to lose the shepherds and even Joseph from the side of that amazingly clean manger, and bring in a midwife and maybe some local women who are helping out. The magi, of course, are still on their way to the wrong place and the wrong person. But whether Jesus was born in an actual stable, what time of year it was, even what year it was—none of that matters very much. It was a birth with blood and pain, in difficult circumstances. The bright morning star, the Word, was made flesh and dwelt among us, as one of us.



This Christmas, far too many people, whether part of families or alone, are also in difficult circumstances, in need of God's love expressed in very practical ways. Jesus lived among and ministered to people who all too often knew appalling hardship, and he calls everyone who loves him to share his ministry.

And far too many people, even if they're reasonably secure in home, work and finances, are still suffering from being cut off from family, friends and perhaps a sense of purpose. To say nothing of the disappointment of suddenly ended family visits for many of us. Jesus lived among and ministered to people who were cut off from society and sometimes from family.

Things are certainly grim this year, and we don't forget that, but we still hope for the time of justice, reconciliation and healing. And we can rejoice in the people who have stepped up—hospital staff from consultants to cleaners; contributors to foodbanks and the volunteers who check, sort

and deliver; people who are looking after their neighbours in all kinds of ways.

The poem *Moontime of the winter* by the late minister and poet Kate McIlhagga, frames the nativity in a wintry, broken world.

In the moontime of the winter,
when the sun redly rises;
in the moontime of the winter
when the trees starkly stretch,
then, O Christ, you come:
softly as a gently falling snowflake,
with the lusty energy of a new-born boy,
the blood and pain of your coming
staining the distant horizon

In the frost of the starlight,
when the sun gives way to moon;
when the earth is turned to stone,
then, O Christ, you come:
slowly as the rhythm of the seasons,
quickly as the rush of cradling waters,
worshipped by the wise,
adored by the humble,
the ecstatic joy of your coming
heralding songs of peace.

Into the world of refugee and soldier,
the soles of your feet have touched the ground.
Into the world of banker and beggar,
the soles of your feet have touched the ground.
Into the world of Jew and Arab,
the soles of your feet have touched the ground.
Walk with us, saviour of the poor,
be a light on our way,
travel beside the weary,
fill the broken-hearted with hope
and heal the nations,
that all may walk
in the light of the glory of God.

The second carol is *Good Christian men rejoice*

In the Gospel for today, Luke tells how the baby boy was presented in the temple with the ritual sacrifice, and the joy of Simeon and Anna when they recognised their Messiah. *Luke 2:22-40*

I think we must have that favourite, *Christmas*, by John Betjeman today, and those watching online or present in Weoley Hill Church will hear him reading his own words.

The bells of waiting Advent ring,

The Tortoise stove is lit again
And lamp-oil light across the night
Has caught the streaks of winter rain
In many a stained-glass window sheen
From Crimson Lake to Hooker's Green.

The holly in the windy hedge
And round the Manor House the yew
Will soon be stripped to deck the ledge,
The altar, font and arch and pew,
So that villagers can say
'The Church looks nice' on Christmas Day.

Provincial public houses blaze
And Corporation tramcars clang,
On lighted tenements I gaze
Where paper decorations hang,
And bunting in the red Town Hall
Says 'Merry Christmas to you all'

And London shops on Christmas Eve
Are strung with silver bells and flowers
As hurrying clerks the City leave
To pigeon-haunted classic towers,
And marbled clouds go scudding by
The many-steepled London sky.

And girls in slacks remember Dad,
And oafish louts remember Mum,
And sleepless children's hearts are glad,
And Christmas morning bells say 'Come!'
Even to shining ones who dwell
Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.

And is it true? and is it true?
The most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea

Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissue fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant.

No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single Truth compare -
That God was Man in Palestine
And lives to-day in Bread and Wine.

Prayers of the people: Almighty God and Father of light, a child is born to us and a Son is given to us. Your eternal Word leapt down from heaven in the silent watches of the night, and now your Church is filled with wonder at the nearness of her God. Open our hearts to receive His life and increase our vision with the rising of dawn, that our lives may be filled with His glory and His peace, who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

We pray that through us, and through others, your gift of love and life will be shared throughout the world with people who have not enjoyed a happy Christmas time: with people who are ill with Covid-19 and with people suffering from the economic and social disruption it has brought; with people who are suffering from war, violence, injustice and poverty.

We pray that through us and others, people in this country and this city will share in your gift of love and life: people who can't afford the celebrations they see around them; people who fear what the next weeks and months will bring; people who can't afford enough food, or warm homes or clothing; people who are lonely, people who are caught up in anger and quarrels; people who feel empty, frightened or sad. We pray that you will help us to show your love through our actions.

We pray for people who are far from home, for people in hospital or in care, for people cut off from friends and family.

We remember those who are unnamed, but who are in our hearts.

Grant that all people may hear together the song of joy, and find their homes in the garden of justice and hope, that we may experience the fullness of life, which is your will for all, in the coming of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's prayer

Offering prayer: Living God, we thank you for the gift of Jesus. You have held nothing back from us, but have given us your only Son. You lavish good gifts on us, many of which we simply take for granted. Help us, in giving our gifts to you, to count our blessings, be good stewards of what is entrusted to us, and live lives to your glory. For Jesus' sake, amen

The blessing will be followed by the final carol. *Noel* is a lively, jazzy setting by Gordon (in a difficult time, we might say,) of *The first Noel*.

From our mother's womb you have known us, O God. You call us to follow you through all our days and seek us even when we wander. As we advance in years, clothe us with your love, that we may grow in grace and find favour in your sight; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you are worshipping through this printed page, I invite you to sing *The first Noel* as joyfully as you can or find your favourite recording to listen to.

Noel!

*Prize-winning card by Cathy Grigg's grandson
Ellis (age 7)*

