



Christmas Day Candle Lighting



The candles of Love, Hope, Peace and Joy are lit. Now we light our candle to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Christ-child, the Saviour of the world.

For unto us a child has been born, a son has been given; authority rests upon his shoulders: and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)

Light the Christ-candle and share this Prayer

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, on this day we step away from the wrapping paper and the gifts to remember your great gift to our world. Keep us focused on the one born to Save us and the world, The Prince of Peace. May the baby in the manger remind us today that we may sing for joy that Jesus Christ is born.

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

We know the expression, “No News is Good News.” It usually means everything is ok. Except that’s not really true of Covid times.

I was on a Zoom Guild meeting when Louise, our Guild President, paused to invite everyone to share their news . . . any good happenings or thoughts to lift our spirits. There was a lull, and the consensus was there was “no news”. . . the ladies all said “We haven’t been anywhere, we haven’t done anything, we haven’t seen anybody.”

This Christmas there are no pantomimes or parties, no cheery carols or cuddles! So now “no news” doesn’t really feel like Good News at all.

Many of us are feeling that there has been very little Good News in these Covid times. The letters BC normally stand for Before Christ but now people refer to BC as before COVID. Captain Sir Tom Moore, who raised money for the NHS, looks ahead to a VC, (Not a VD day) but a VC day . . a Victory over Covid Day . . . people have told me that this feels a bit like a war—only in wartime people could still hug one another and meet with friends.

Sometimes we just have to laugh just to keep ourselves going . . . amidst all the doom and gloom, Boris Johnson made me refer to my dictionary to look up a word. This word has several meanings; as a noun it means a *celebration*; as an adjective it means *cheerful*; as an adverb it means *extremely or very much . . . or over the top . . .* I wonder if you have guessed.

The gist of what Boris was saying as I recall it, in his inimitable style was something like,

“Christmas should be Jolly and we want you to have a jolly good time. But, by jolly it can’t be too jolly this year, otherwise things could get jolly awful . . . this new strain of the virus means that we have to be jolly careful. This is no time to go out for a jolly or you or your loved ones could be jolly unwell. Right then, Jolly Good!”

The news can make us smile but this year when we cannot be jolly, it is a good time to recognise our own deep personal need for Good News . . . not just Good News about a vaccine or a Brexit Deal. . . but the kind of Good News that can put all of life into perspective- the kind of Good News that reminds us that no matter how dark the world, how frightening the circumstance, God is coming to be with us—God is here.



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This is the Good News the angels proclaimed to the Shepherds on that first Christmas night, when they said, “Do not be afraid, for behold we bring Good News.” The angel heralded the birth of a new life, a new era of new hope and peace. There was so much joy in the air that the Angels burst into song rejoicing, “Glory to God in the Highest and on earth, peace and good-will towards humanity”

One of my favourite Christmas Carols was written by Dr Edmund Sears, who knew all too well that deep personal longing for hope and peace in a weary world. He was a minister in Boston who had suffered from a nervous breakdown. He wrote a poem one Christmas Eve in 1849 and it was published in the depression. He himself had suffered from a nervous breakdown. But he was also deeply distressed by all the unrest and trouble in the world. The United States had just fought in the Mexican war to annex Texas and California—and the fight over slavery meant that Civil War was imminent. At the same time, violent revolutions were taking place in Europe. And so, he wrote with all the news of wars at home and abroad fresh in his mind, he portrayed our world as full of “sin and strife”, - a weary world not hearing the Christmas message and yet, so in need of it. The poem speaks to those who bend, “beneath life’s crushing load” and to those who long for a time when the “whole world will give back the song which now the angel’s sing.” Weary toilers must not give up hope. This Good News from the angels is here to encourage us if we hear it. Sears feels that at times the world is deaf to the angel’s song.

The poem encourages all who toil to hear the angel chorus, “ Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, and goodwill towards all people.” He writes because he feels within him our deep human longing for hope, for peace and he reminds us that these things can really only come from God. Peace among people, peace amongst the nations, peace within our hearts, cannot come from human schemes but from God who alone saves us from death and despair.

Sears’ poem touched so many people that it moved the composer Richard Storrs Willis to put the words to music—to a tune called *Carol*. Richard Storrs Willis had trained under Mendelssohn and the tune became widely sung. (For some reason, later in 1874, the song, *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* was adapted to an English melody composed by Arthur Sullivan in the UK and that is the tune we know best still. However, in many countries, it is still sung to the original tune named *Carol* from 1850. Here is our family friend Chris Dillard singing it to that original tune. I invite you to meditate on the words.





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IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR

It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth
to touch their harps of gold:
'Peace on earth, good will to you
from heaven's all-gracious King!'
the world in solemn stillness lay
to hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come,
with peaceful wings unfurled
and still their heavenly music floats
o'er all the weary world;
above its sad and lowly plains
they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o'er its Babel-sounds
the blessèd angels sing.

But with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the angles' hymn have rolled
two thousand years of wrong;
and warring humankind hears not
the love-song which they bring;
oh, hush the noise and still the strife
to hear the angels sing.

And you, beneath life's crushing load
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow,
look now! For glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing;
oh, rest beside the weary road,
and hear the angels sing.
For lo! The days are hastening on,
by prophet bards foretold,
when, with the ever-rolling years,
still dawns the Age of Gold,
when peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendours fling,
and all the world give back the song
which now the angels sing.



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The angels first shared their of Good News of a Saviour, not to a private audience of powerful or important persons. . not to Caesar and Herod, nor the chief priests, but to lowly shepherds watching their sheep. Shepherds who were amongst the most looked down upon and despised of people because they nature of their work meant they lived outdoors a lot and were considered poor and unclean and unfit to fulfil the temple rituals. That said, God himself is so often described as a shepherd. God was willing to lay himself down and humble himself. The City of David was considered to be a village of shepherds. King David himself had once been a shepherd boy. God Himself is so often described by Jesus as a shepherd who goes out of his way to care for His sheep. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd willing to lay down his life for his sheep. Time and time again, the Christmas story reminds us that with God the exalted become lowly and the lowly are exalted.

God would not come as a mighty conqueror or a military King, but as a vulnerable baby in a poor stable manger . . . that was the sign, God's saving might, the conquering power of such a saviour was this: Love. God was coming into the world and continues to come into our lives even in such dark times as this. . . because God loves us. And the visible testimony to his life in us is that power of love- the love in our hearts, the love we share. And that love is within us and within our church family whether we are together or apart because it is eternal. Because, as Paul reminds us, such love, "hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things." This is the love that casts out fear. The angel began the message with the words, "Do not be afraid, for behold I bring **Good News** of great joy for all people."

We might not meet this year and we might not enjoy the jolly festive aspects of Christmas that we miss. But we are still the Church, and we still belong to God's love. Sears poem reminds us to hear the angels song saying "Don't be afraid. . . for this is the Good News." With or without Covid, the message abides through present time and eternity.

We can trust in a God of hope- who fulfils His promises that no situation is permanently painful, nor permanently hopeless beyond the power of his love. The presence of Christ enables us to be aware of sin and war, disease and death. These touch us cruelly, and yes, they can make us weary. Even in the very midst of darkness or death, we have discovered life. As Saint Paul says, "To discover life is Christ." (Philippians 1:12) This life in Christ brings joy and that is our Good News.

Even in these Covid times, I know many of you have been working your socks off to bring **Good News** to others. I think a lot of knitting was going on so that every child in the Primary Schools could get a little gift in a tiny Christmas Stocking. . . and Currie Kirk was still able to collect Shoe boxes to send to children in Eastern Europe to give *them* some Good News that we care. . . and I know some of you continued knitting hats and jumpers for Syrian refugees in Lebanon as well as continuing the ministry of the Care Van for Bethany Trust and the homeless. A lot of you delivered Christmas Cards, and the Guild kept collected items for Christmas for the food bank. As a Kirk, the moneys from the donations that you gave to the Benevolent Fund was able to fund a lot of much needed support to children and families at the High School as well as purchase food hampers for struggling families at this time.

I hope and pray that this Christmas will continue to be a celebration in your life. We celebrate the great news of God-with-us. All that he has promised is fulfilled. That glorious song of old reminds us that light is stronger than darkness, and that a close relationship with God gives us a sure footing, whatever our circumstance. And that is why we hear the Angel's Song and we rejoice. Fear Not the angel says, "for behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord."