



At Home Service

Christmas Day 2020

Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8 ESV

# Good News! Great Joy!

"...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,<sup>10</sup> because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). (from Matthew's gospel, chapter 1, and Matthew quoting from Isaiah 7 NIV)

"For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." (from Luke's gospel, chapter 2 NIV)

Happy Christmas to you all! Despite what some are saying, Christmas is **not** cancelled, and never will be, whatever the world throws at us: each and every day contains the wonderful promise of that first Christmas, when faith, hope and love all came together in the birth of Jesus Christ, he who was both fully man, and fully God. He humbled himself in obedience to God the Father, to the point of death, even death on a cross, and through that sacrifice gave us the way to be forgiven our sins and with the promise of eternal life through his grace, mercy and love. That is the Good News, and it should fill our hearts with Great Joy, a joy that the world cannot give us, Good News to lift the head of the lowliest shepherd, and humble the most powerful rulers. It is hopeful, and hope-full.

Let's commit this time to God, and then we will have our first song.

Dear Lord God, we thank you that we can gather today and be together even though we are apart. We bring to you our praise and our worship, and we thank you for your grace, your mercy and your love, especially this Christmas Day. Please bless this time together as we pray, read from your Word, and learn more about you. Holy Spirit, please encourage us, and remind us of the hope that we have through Jesus' loving grace and mercy. We thank you that you sent your son Jesus to bring light into a dark world, and to bring the possibility of real hope and lasting joy and peace to us; not a peace as the world would know it, but a deep and lasting peace that can only come from knowing that you, Lord God, love and care for us. Please help us to see the real meaning at the heart of Christmas time: Good News! Great Joy! Amen.

I've chosen a bunch of alternative takes on some well-loved carols. You have a choice – a Christmas gift! You can choose which to listen to, or listen to both of them...

Chris Tomlin's version of What child is this?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jroBAI3WW8>

Darius Rucker and Lindsey Stirling's version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ud2mHuNhoM>

1595 William Chatterton Dix (1837-98)

**WHAT CHILD IS THIS**, who, laid to rest  
On Mary's lap is sleeping:  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,  
While shepherds watch are keeping?  
This, this is Christ the King,  
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:  
Haste, haste, to bring Him praise,  
The babe, the Son of Mary.

Why lies He in such mean estate,  
Where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here  
The silent Word is pleading.  
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,  
The cross be borne for me, for you.  
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,  
The babe, the Son of Mary.

So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,  
Come, peasant, king, to own Him;  
The King of kings salvation brings,  
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.  
Raise, raise a song on high,  
The virgin sings her lullaby.  
Joy, joy for Christ is born,  
The babe, the Son of Mary.

*A Songs of Fellowship Worship Resource*

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### **The first reading is from Isaiah, chapter 9:**

<sup>2</sup>The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.

<sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Every warrior's boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,  
will be fuel for the fire.

<sup>6</sup> 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 Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

**As darkness of night descends over Bethlehem all those many years ago, let's have another carol.**

**And since it is Christmas, a little bit of Cliff Richard seems appropriate; and also Matt Redman's  
ace version of O Little Town of Bethlehem:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOCiuF291\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOCiuF291_o)

**Matt Redman**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOCiuF291\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOCiuF291_o)

**The second reading is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2. It was down as verses 1-14, but we  
should include the verses up to the end of verse 20 – we need to finish the reading to share with  
the shepherds in glorifying and praising God!**

### **The Birth of Jesus**

**2** In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census that took place while<sup>[a]</sup> Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And everyone went to their own town to register.

<sup>4</sup> So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup> He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

<sup>15</sup> 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."

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

**We can't have the account of the shepherds from Luke's gospel without hearing the song about the shepherds watching their flocks. Socks were not a "thing" in first century Palestine, so they certainly would not have been washing them.**

**The next song is from the Barnsley Nightingale, with her own Yorkshire twist to it, and then there's a great version from Andrew Peterson.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxQQd7GtUt8>

**Kate Rusby**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7HPWIBKg9M>

**Andrew Peterson**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqOmuVSCPYY>

602 Nahum Tate (with tweaks by Kate Rusby)

**WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED** their flocks by night,  
All seated on the ground,  
The angel of the Lord came down  
And glory shone around.

Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells  
Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells,  
They cheer us on our heavenly way  
Sweet chiming bells

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

Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells  
Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells,  
They cheer us on our heavenly way  
Sweet chiming bells

'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.

Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells  
Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells,  
They cheer us on our heavenly way  
Sweet chiming bells

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

Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells  
Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells,  
They cheer us on our heavenly way  
Sweet chiming bells

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

Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells  
Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells,  
They cheer us on our heavenly way  
Sweet chiming bells

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

Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells  
Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells,  
They cheer us on our heavenly way  
Sweet chiming bells

## Good news! Great Joy!

Luke had three main messages to get across in his gospel that are still true over 2000 years since that first Christmas. Firstly, Luke brings us the message of salvation from our wrongdoings, from our sinful nature, which is the **good news** of the gospel. Secondly, that salvation is found in Christ alone. It is the grace and mercy of Christ alone that brings salvation through his sacrificial death on the cross in payment for our wrong-doings. And thirdly, that this salvation, this good news, is for everyone, it is for the whole world. Who or what you are is not important here: whether you are the Prime Minister or a Prisoner in Pentonville, it is good news for you, if you are willing to hear it and accept it. And that should bring **great joy** to all hearts who hear and accept the message of Christmas.

Luke wrote his gospel with care and attention to detail, and he is known for his historical accuracy. In the account of that first Christmas there is little doubt that he would have visited Mary to get first-hand information about Jesus, because of all the detail he includes that focus on Mary and her extended family. Luke opens his gospel by confirming he had talked to eyewitnesses and that he wanted to write “an orderly account” (Luke 1vs 1-4) because he wanted us to have “certainty regarding the things you have been taught”. He tells us that after the shepherds had visited the new family, “Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart”, and clearly her memory of that time would have been clear and much treasured indeed.

Over 500 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Micah had written that the messiah, the saviour who would bring salvation to Israel and to the world, would be born in a small and obscure town called Bethlehem, who’s main claim to fame was that King David had also been born there, many years before. Micah wrote (5:2)

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans<sup>[a]</sup> of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,  
whose origins are from of old,  
from ancient times.”

And so we are told by Luke that during reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus, a census was called for all people across the vast Roman empire, which included the captured territory of what is now modern Israel. The Emperor Augustus called a number of census during his rule; and Luke records that Joseph, a handyman and carpenter, took his bride Mary back to his hometown of Bethlehem to take part in this census, and during this time she gave birth to her firstborn son. Joseph named the boy Jesus, just as he had been instructed by an angel to do so, which we read in Matthew’s account of the birth. Now, Matthew’s account of the birth and very early life tells us of the visit of a group of wise men to see the baby Jesus. I am sure there were some who would have viewed them with suspicion as “foreigners” but at least they were important foreigners, with social standing and status, who brought valuable gifts suitable for a king. These were the kind of visitors that the neighbours would no doubt have viewed with approval.

But Luke’s account tells us of a very different group of people who were on the scene the very night of the saviour’s birth, and who would not have met with neighbourly approval at all. During the time of Jesus, the shepherds of Palestine and Judea were not seen to be the kind of people you invited home for tea. They were viewed as the lowest of the low; stuck out on the hills and fields looking after the animals, they were not always able to follow the religious rules and rituals of the time,

especially the rules around cleanliness and washing, which would have brought them condemnation from people like the Pharisees. They were seen as light fingered and untrustworthy, so much so that they were apparently not allowed to give testimony in the law courts. At best, people tolerated them because they did a necessary job; at worst they were disliked and held in contempt. Ironically, these particular shepherds were probably looking after sheep that would provide some of the sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem for those very people who despised them so.

And yet. And yet. Here we have the account of the night of Jesus' birth, and the first people that God chooses to announce the birth of the promised messiah are these bunch of social outcasts and misfits. And it's not an announcement by word of mouth, or a newspaper announcement or an Instagram post, or even a TikTok video. No, what we get here is an announcement set to volume 11, with an angel of the Lord and "a multitude of the heavenly host", appearing in a blaze of glory on a Palestine hill, frightening the shepherds half to death, and sending them in a rush of excitement and anticipation down to Bethlehem, to crowd around the new mother and father and to gaze in wonder at the baby, wrapped up and laid in a feeder trough for farm animals. Good news! Great joy!

God clearly likes shepherds. Several of the greatest leaders and prophets of the Old Testament were shepherds. Moses and David were both shepherds and they became two of the greatest leaders of Israel. Amos the prophet was a shepherd. The most well-known psalm, Psalm 23, is all about the shepherding care and love of God for people. During his ministry, the adult Jesus would refer to himself as the good shepherd (John 10 vs 11-18) and would often use shepherding allusions when talking to his disciples and the crowds who followed him. Shepherds were not significant in the culture of the time – but they were significant to God. It is amazing how often God entrusts the insignificant, those who are viewed as the least amongst us, the down trodden, the excluded, with His message of good news.

The angel's message to the shepherds is the first preaching of the gospel message of good news! of great joy! for all people: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." But it is also a very personal message: I bring **YOU** good news...for today in the city of David there has been born for **YOU** a Saviour..." Once again, God chooses people whom society would not have chosen for the greatest birth announcement in all history, and once again God shows that He cares for everyone, no matter who they are. He does not care at all about the opinions of anyone. He makes His own choices, and in choosing these shepherds He chose people completely out of step with the society of the time. You can imagine the shepherd's excitedly discussing the news as they hurried down to the town: why us? Who are we to be told this? This message can't be for us – can it? But it was. What is more, they had heard and acted on the good news, and with great joy came to find Christ. They found a holy infant in a lowly manger. And those same shepherds then became the first ever evangelists for the good news of great joy, as they saw the truth of what they had been told, they believed it, and went out to tell everyone about it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor, who stood up to the Nazis in WW2, and was eventually executed for his faith. He wrote that

"The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come."

We are not told if the shepherds were troubled in soul; but for sure they would have known themselves to be poor (in spirit) and imperfect, and in seeing the Christ-child that first Christmas they knew that they could look forward to something greater to come. They went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Their joy was clear to all that they

met. This Christmas day, when God Himself stepped into our world in human form, may we know that however imperfect or lowly we are, however poor in spirit we feel in these troubled and uncertain times, that we can come with wonder and joy to Jesus, as did those shepherds, knowing that this good news is for **us**, and that we take the message of God's **good news** of **great joy** out into the world in all that we say and do. Amen.

**Prayer time:**

Christ, for whom there was no room in the inn,  
give courage to all who are homeless;  
in your mercy  
**hear our prayer.**

Christ, who fled into Egypt,  
give comfort to all refugees;  
in your mercy  
**hear our prayer.**

Christ, who fasted in the desert,  
give relief to all who are starving;  
in your mercy  
**hear our prayer.**

Christ, who hung in agony on the cross,  
give strength to all who suffer;  
in your mercy  
**hear our prayer.**

Lord of the Church  
**hear our prayer,**  
**and make us one in heart and mind**  
**to serve you with joy for ever. Amen. \***

**We pray especially for all those who have lost loved ones this year, and who are facing their first Christmas with that loss in their hearts. Wounds heal but scars remain. Holy Spirit, we ask you as our Comforter and Helper, to be with all those who are sad and sorrowful today, and bring them a peace that only You can bring. The good news of great joy of hope in Christ be theirs this Christmastime.**

**We close our prayers with our Lord's prayer:**

**Our Father in heaven,**  
**hallowed be your name,**  
**your kingdom come,**  
**your will be done,**  
**on earth as in heaven.**  
**Give us today our daily bread.**  
**Forgive us our sins**  
**as we forgive those who sin against us.**  
**Lead us not into temptation**

**but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.**

We close with two wonderful versions of:

Joy to the World!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCPwICPRBPI>

**Adam & Kid - "Joy to the World"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tC3SwhJsLqU>

**Chris Tomlin**

314 Isaac Watts.

**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.

Closing prayer:

God of hope, who brought love into this world,  
be the love that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought peace into this world,  
be the peace that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought joy into this world,  
be the joy that dwells between us.

God of hope, the rock we stand upon,  
be the centre, the focus of our lives  
always, and particularly this Advent time.\*\*

Bless us this Christmas time, O Lord, and help us to share, in what we say and what we do, the Good News of Great Joy of hope, love and salvation that came to earth in Jesus. *“In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

Amen!

**Have a blessed, happy, and healthy Christmas.**

**Good News! Great Joy!**

**Bible passages from NIV**

\*Prayers for Christmas from the Church of England

\*\*God of hope blessing from [faithandworship.com](http://faithandworship.com)