

Salford Methodist Circuit



Christmas Morning - 25th December 2020

Rev Clare Stainsby

Advent Liturgy

*Light a candle in a darkened place,
In its flame see hope on every face,
Christ our Saviour will be born,
Heralding a brand new dawn, so let it burn.*

As we light this candle, we remember Jesus born in a stable on that first Christmas day. This flame reminds us that on that day God lit a flame of hope that reaches to us across the centuries.

Christmas God, we thank you for that moment when you touched the earth and became one of us. Light of our world, shine upon us this day and every day. Amen.

*Do not fear, today I bring good cheer,
Jesus Christ, the Saviour now is here,
God has lit his flame of love,
Through his Son from Heaven above, so let it burn.*

A ray of hope flickers in the sky, a tiny star lights up way up high,
All across the land, dawns a brand new morn,
This comes to pass when a child is born.

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

Welcome to our service this Christmas morning! happy Christmas to you all!
This is the one Christmas morning when you can welcome the Christ Child into this world, in your dressing gown from the warmth of your own home!

This is the day when we acknowledge the baby of long ago, but a baby that still matters for our lives. A baby that was God unmasked and here on this earth among his people. A baby who would grow to experience all of human life. God was no longer out there and separate looking in. He was in the midst of it all - and still is! We don't just celebrate an ancient birth and a lovely story. We celebrate God here and with us now!

Hymn: O Come All Ye Faithful

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*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!*

*True God of true God, Light of Light eternal,
Lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father, begotten, not created:
O come, let us adore him...*

*See how the shepherds, summoned to his cradle,
Leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;
We too will thither bend our joyful footsteps:
O come, let us adore him...*

*Lo, star-led chieftains, Magi, Christ adoring,
Offer him incense, gold, and myrrh;
We to the Christ-child bring our hearts' oblations:
O come, let us adore him...*

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

*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 adore him...*

Prayers

Yes Lord, we greet you, born this day among us! We come before you in worship and adoration. We raise our voices with the angels. Our hearts burst with an excitement we share with the shepherds. We look on you with pride, as Joseph must have done, because you have arrived here on this earth, among us all. We gaze at you in love, as Mary did, knowing that love for us is at the heart of your coming. And we offer gifts to you, as did wise men back then, and as do those who are wise this day. We offer ourselves and our hearts to you in worship and praise. Because you chose to offer yourself to us. Thank you that you came long ago. Thank you that your coming matters just as much today as it did back then. Thank you, living Lord, that wherever we worship you today you are there with us, receiving our praises and enfolding us in your love. Be at the heart of all we are and do this Christmas time. Amen.



Bible Reading: Luke 2 : 1 - 7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn.

If I was doing this service in church right now, this is the point I'd be asking you if you have received any gifts. Has anyone got any presents they want to show us? I'd like to be showing you some presents that I've received, but it's tricky as I'm recording this before we actually reach Christmas Day itself, and I haven't had a single gift from anyone at all - not so far anyway, I do remain hopeful of course.

But I can show you the Christmas present I received actually 60 years ago, because one present I got back then is still an important part of my life - this is John Teddy, some of you may have met him before. As you can see, he's a bit battered and worn right now - perhaps the same as me - but still the same lovely friend that was wrapped up under the Christmas tree so long ago - and still a much loved part of my life. Even though his arms and legs are held on by his jumper and his trousers, even though he's not strong enough to be cuddled in bed much these days as he's inclined to lose a bit of stuffing every time I try that, I still love him very much.

And I can still remember what I got for Christmas in 1967. I got a hamster in a cage - a real living hamster. I decided to call it after a character in Tales of The Riverbank - I bet some of you remember that ancient black and white children's television programme! But even at 7 I thought calling the hamster 'Hammy' was just a bit obvious, so I called her 'Roddy' after the rat! I can't show you Roddy because she was buried under an apple tree many years ago, but I can still remember her of course. I don't even have a photograph. I think I did have a camera as a child - but that probably came as a Christmas present some years after the hamster - but I'm happy to remember both.

One Christmas a few years ago, I came home from my Christmas Eve service to find a wrapped up parcel on my doorstep. Of course, I kept it until the next morning, and when I opened it I found inside a teapot - and not any old teapot - a purple teapot! It was a gift from a lady that had recently lost her husband and I'd sat and drunk a cup of tea with her and had admired her purple teapot, because, at the time, I had just decided to paint my kitchen purple and at the

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time I was filling it with all sorts of purple gadgets. She remembered this and bought me one! A really kind, thoughtful gift from a very unexpected place.

I wonder how many Christmas presents I've received, and eaten, drunk, bathed in, worn, played with, used and eventually used up over the years. So many things have been given to me and appreciated and used and cared for.

I'm just going to play some music now, and I invite you to think back to Christmases past and presents that you have received - especially the unexpected ones. If you're with someone else, why not chat about the presents you remember receiving. I won't be offended if you talk over the music!

Instrumental Music: God Rest You Merry Gentlemen

Hymn: See amid the winter's snow.

See, amid the winter's snow, born for us on earth below,
See, the Lamb of God appears, promised from eternal years!
*Hail, the ever-blessèd morn! Hail, redemption's happy dawn!
Sing 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!
Hail, the ever-blessèd morn...

Say, you holy shepherds, say, what your joyful news today;
Why then have you left your sheep on the lonely mountain steep?
Hail, the ever-blessèd morn...

'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.'
Hail, the ever-blessèd morn...

Sacred infant, holy child, tender love so pure and mild
Comes from heaven's highest bliss down to such a world as this!
Hail, the ever-blessèd morn...

Bible Reading: Matthew 2 : 1 - 12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a

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ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Gifts have an important part to play in the Christmas story. Wise men don't always get much of a look at this point in the Christmas story because their bit comes a little while after. But they are worth a mention, because they brought gifts and we've been giving gifts at Christmas time ever since! They are very mysterious, those wise men: lots of stories have grown up around them, but we only really know for sure the bits we read about in those the few verses in Matthew's Gospel that we just heard. We often assume that there were three of them, as they brought three gifts, but that's pure speculation - Mathew simply doesn't tell us that doesn't say. But the gifts that they brought from wherever they came, were spectacularly impressive and costly gifts. Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. We probably know most about gold in this country - and we know of its value as a precious metal. Frankincense and Myrrh were also immensely valuable products. Both came mainly from the Arabian peninsula, and were highly prized: frankincense was used as a perfume that was burned in the temples, and myrrh was a healing agent and an anointing oil.

I remember going shopping before Christmas one year when I was a teacher, and seeing one of the children out of my class in the street, who shouted across the street - "Hiyah Miss - I've just bought your Christmas present - I've been to Poundland!" The wise men, whoever they were, brought the best, and offered their gifts with their worship. And so we give gifts!

But Christmas is about so much more than giving gifts - it's also about receiving gifts. Those are two sides of the same coin of course. What is given is also received, by someone else. And the pleasure of Christmas can be both in the giving and the receiving. The wise men's gifts matter, but no matter how valuable they were, or what happened to them after they received, - and we don't know much about that either- those are not nearly as important as the central gift of the whole of the Christmas story.

For in that sleeping baby is the most valuable and significant gift that was ever given in the history of this world! Because in that tiny sleeping baby - God gave himself to the world. To the world then - the world now - the world of every

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moment in between - and the world of every moment yet to come. God gave himself. God gives himself to us - right here and now - in our Covid ridden, isolated, limited world. God gives himself, but it means nothing more than a nice children's story from long ago, unless we receive that gift. We need to receive it, accept it, give thanks for it, and use it. It's not like a toy you might play with once or twice then forget about. It's not like a bottle of bubble bath that you'll use until it runs out. It's not like the box of chocolates that gives you enormous pleasure until its contents have all been eaten, and the box has been discarded. It's not like that nice jumper that you will wear every day for weeks, until it looks shabby and threadbare. It's not like any other gift that you have ever or will ever receive in your life.

God gives himself to you. And that is a gift for every Christmas, every day of every year, every minute of every day. Because this gift remains as valuable this minute as the day you first received it, and it will never break or wear out, or get used up or lose its value. God gives himself to you. Are you ready to receive him? Are you prepared to say thank you? Are you willing to make use of this gift in every part of every day of your life? And do you believe that this gift is more precious than gold, by far; more sweet than the finest frankincense; more healing than the costliest myrrh; and that it will be given to you every day for the rest of your life, and beyond that forever? Do you believe it? Can you believe it?

I have one more gift to show you that I received at Christmas at some point so long ago. It's a kind of Russian doll, sort of a wise man, and obviously like a Russian doll you take it apart - it squeaks a bit. When I got into the first layer, I find what I think is a rather ordinary looking man, very serious - Joseph perhaps. And then when I take down the next layer - that one didn't squeak so much - we find a young woman looking a little surprised - Mary I assume - mouth open in horror - no, maybe not horror, just surprise. And then inside Mary... there's a tiny angel with wings - looking very peaceful and serene. And another layer comes off - this one's a bit squeaky - and there, inside is a cow, or it could be a pig, it's got more of a piggy nose than a cow nose - but I think it's most likely a cow. Yellow star on its forehead so I don't think it's a Friesian, but probably a cow - definitely part of the Christmas story of that first Christmas day. Right in the very middle of my Russian doll, there is a tiny sleeping baby, with a smile on his face, resting in the hay...



I only got to the baby by unwrapping several layers. I think that's the most important message when we're talking about receiving the gift of God himself. We need to open that gift, and spend our whole lives opening layer after layer, each one taking us closer to the one at the heart of it all. Every layer we unwrap

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is valuable - but getting close to the baby - our God himself - is the work of a life time. And it will never disappoint.

So whenever you watch this, whether it's Christmas Day or so other time to suit you, I hope you find moments of real joy and peace, I hope you find love, and I hope you find yourself willing and able to receive the One at the heart of it all - our God who is here amongst, smiling peacefully at the centre of it all.

Hymn: Cradled in a manger, meanly

*Cradled in a manger, meanly laid the Son of Man his head;
sleeping his first earthly slumber where the oxen had been fed.
Happy were those shepherds listening to the holy angel's word;
happy they within that stable, worshipping their infant Lord.*

*Happy all who hear the message of his coming from above;
happier still who hail his coming, and with praises greet his love.
Blessèd Saviour, Christ most holy, in a manger thou didst rest;
canst thou stoop again, yet lower, and abide within my breast?*

*Evil things are there before thee; in the heart, where they have fed,
wilt thou pitifully enter, Son of Man, and lay thy head?
Enter, then, O Christ most holy; make a Christmas in my heart;
make a heaven of my manger: it is heaven where thou art.*

*And to those who never listened to the message of thy birth,
who have winter, but no Christmas bringing them thy peace on earth,
send to these the joyful tidings; by all people, in each home,
be there heard the Christmas anthem: praise to God, the Christ has come!*

Prayers

We praise you, loving God, for giving yourself to us, once long ago, for all time. We thank you that we can reopen this gift every day, and through it find meaning and purpose in our lives. Today, as we celebrate Christmas Day once more, we never tire of hearing of your coming, or of what it means for our lives.

Christmas is not the same this year, and today we pray for those who are struggling.

We think of those who feel sad that they can't spend this time of year with all those that they love. We all carry some pain and grief because of the limitations necessarily put on the way we spend this time together with loved ones. But we give thanks for all those that we can share with in whatever way.

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We pray for those whose sadness takes all the possible joy out of this day. We think of those who feel sad for all that they have lost this year - whether its people that they love, or opportunities that they had planned for. We remember those who have lost jobs, and homes, and security. We pray for those who have lost hope, or lost faith in the way ahead for this world. We pray for those who feel sad because the world around them has changed so much through these struggling months, and fear for whatever comes next.

We remember those who suffer with illnesses of many kinds, and for those who are caring for them wherever that may be happening.

We remember our church families, and pray that the day when we can be reunited in safety will come soon.

And as we celebrate your birth, your coming, in whatever ways we have planned for today, we thank you that even if we forget you in the next few hours, or at any time, that you are always there beside us, offering yourself to us again and again and again, this Christmas time and for ever more. Amen.

Song: Mary's Boy Child.

*Long time ago in Bethlehem, so the Holy Bible say,
Mary's boy child, Jesus Christ was born on Christmas day.
Hark now, hear the angels sing, a new King born today,
And we shall live for evermore because of Christmas Day,
Trumpets sound and angels sing, listen to what they say,
That we shall live for evermore because of Christmas Day.*

*While shepherds watched their flocks by night, them see a bright new
shining star,
Them hear a choir sing, the music seem to come from afar,
Now Joseph and his wife, Mary, came to Bethlehem that night,
They found no place to bear her child, not a single room was in sight.
Hark now, hear...*

*By and by they find a little nook in a stable all forlorn
And in a manger cold and dark, Mary's little boy was born,
Long time ago in Bethlehem, so the Holy Bible say,
Mary's boy child, Jesus Christ was born on Christmas day.
Hark now, hear...*

Blessing

God is with us, he is here! May the blessing of God the Father who set his plan in motion, and of God the Holy Spirit who made it all possible, and of God, the Son, our Saviour, the baby in the manger, be with all of us this Christmas time, and all those we love, and remain with us always. Amen.

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O Come All Ye Faithful - Latin, 18th Century

Music arranged by David Valentine Willcocks © 1961 Oxford University Press.

See, Amid The Winter's Snow - Edward Caswell

Music: John Goss

Cradled In A Manger Meanly - George Stringer Rowe

Music: Traditional Melody from Henry Ward Beecher, Arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams © From The English Hymnal, 1906, Oxford University Press

Mary's Boy Child - Jester Hairston

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