

Salford Methodist Circuit



Epiphany - 3rd January 2021

Anita Shepherd

Good morning everybody and welcome to friends old and new as we worship online today. May I take this opportunity to wish all of you a better year than we had in 2020. It is my hope that it will be a much better year for us all. Our call to worship this morning is a modern version of Psalm 150 written by Thom Shuman of the Iona Community.

Call To Worship

Hallelujah!

Praise God with street rap.

Praise God with Bach cantatas.

Praise God with tattooed hands.

Praise God with arthritic hands.

Praise God with smiling eyes.

Praise God with stuffy noses and pockets filled with hankies.

Praise God in stained-glass sanctuaries.

Praise God in public houses.

Let every living, breathing,

big and tall,

short and small,

beloved creature

praise God!

Hallelujah!

Hymn: Joy to the World

*Joy to the world, the Lord is 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 world, the Saviour reigns!
their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, 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
and wonders of his love,*

Salford Methodist Circuit



*and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.*

Prayers

Lord Jesus, may your light shine upon our way,
as once it guided the steps of the Magi:
that we too may be led into your presence and worship you,
the Child of Mary,
the Word of the Father,
the King of nations,
the Saviour of Mankind;
to whom be glory for ever. Amen

God of day and night,
of frost and sunshine,
of rest and growth,
we praise you for the rhythms and patterns of life:
for the gentle dying of each season
and the coming of the next;
for the wonder of new life in all its forms,
and the quiet flowing of youth into age.
Give us eyes and hearts to perceive you
in the unfolding of our years,
and help us in this new-born year
to make more space for you,
the Giver of all.
Amen

Father,
It is so difficult to forgive people who have hurt us or our friends. We want to hit back – and sometimes we do. But you taught us love our enemies no matter what they have done. Forgive us, Lord, when we do not forgive others. Help us to understand why people do and say hurtful things and let our hearts be filled with love for them.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

God of love, we know that all is not right in your world.
We concentrate on what is broken, and not how it might be mended.
We criticise often and praise little, we see the darkness and not the glimmer of light.
We are jealous of our own freedoms, and trample on the freedom of others.
We look to ourselves and not to you.
Forgive us and turn us around, Lord, that we might see possibilities;
hope, promise, grace, healing and love. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Bible Reading: John 1 : 1 - 18

Salford Methodist Circuit



The Word

*At the beginning of all things –
The Word.*

God and the Word.

God himself.

*At the beginning of all things,
the Word and God.*

*All things became what they are
through the Word;*

without the Word

nothing ever became anything.

It was the Word

that made everything alive;

and it was this "being alive"

that has been the Light

by which people have found their way.

The Light is still shining in the Darkness;

the Darkness has never put it out.

"It"? or "He"?

The real Light

shining on everyone alive

was dawning.

*It was dawning on the human world,
it was what made the world a real world,
but nobody recognised it.*

*The whole world was its true home,
yet human beings, crown of creation,
turned their backs on it.*

*But to those who walked by this Light,
to those who trusted it,*

*it gave the right to become
members of God's Family.*

Those became what they were –

not because "they were born like that",

not because "it's human nature to live like that",

not because people "chose to live like that" –

but because God himself gave them their new life.

Not "it" but "He"

The Word became human

and lived a human life like ours.

We saw his splendour,

love's splendour, real splendour.

From the richness of his life,

all of us have received endless kindness;

God showed us what his service meant through Moses;

Salford Methodist Circuit



*he made his love real to us through Jesus.
Nobody has ever seen God himself;
the beloved Son,
who knows his Father's secret thoughts,
has made him plain.*

I've got to admit that when I looked at the readings for today I was a little puzzled to find this reading from St John's Gospel. But the more I thought about it and read it, the more I began to find possible reasons for why it's been chosen.

Perhaps the first and most obvious reason is in that sentence – "At the beginning of all things", God as we know created the universe and the world we live in – "in the beginning" – at the start of all things and here we are three days into the start of a new year. Does anyone feel that the days which are to come are like a blank piece of paper in which anything can happen or we could use them for whatever we choose? I always love getting a new diary with its empty pages – 365 days which I don't know what they'll contain. Yes, they will be days that are already spoken for, like having to go to work for instance – Mondays, Wednesdays & Fridays I will know I will be at Lance Burn Health Centre in Salford unless I've booked leave, I know what my next few preaching engagements are and our main summer holiday is booked because I always booked it as we're leaving the previous September.

Despite the upheaval that the pandemic caused during 2020, we were lucky enough to be able to go away last year, so I booked this year's holiday before we left. In previous years I've also been able to put in a new diary my regular activities which happen either weekly or monthly - so Thursdays are for Choir practice, and the second Wednesday of every month is for Local History. But those and other regular activities have had to be suspended since March and there's no inkling of when they might recommence so, at the moment, my 2021 diary has more blank spaces than usual.

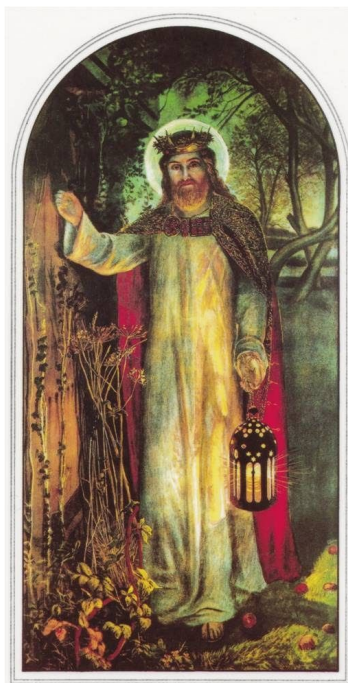
A new year gives us the chance for a fresh start, to put the past behind us, but carrying our memories with us as we look to the future and wonder what it will hold. I'm sure we are all hoping for a lessening of and eventual end to the various restrictions we've been living with for the last nine months – more chances of seeing friends and family, more freedom of movement and hopes that the vaccines being worked on and produced will be successful and enable us all to lead a more normal life.

A fresh start was what God was doing when he came to earth as Jesus. The Old Testament tells us how God tried to establish a relationship with the Israelites time and time again because they kept turning away from him. His coming to earth as Jesus was yet another beginning, by coming among them he was hoping once and for all to have a one-to-one relationship with the whole of mankind, not just the Jews.



The passage also continues the theme of lighting up dark areas and light that becomes stronger, which began in Advent. When John refers to 'the Word' he's referring to Jesus who is both the Creator and Sustainer of our universe. His life is the light for all people – both Jews and Gentiles. He is the light of the world who came to earth as a baby and who's light has never gone out and never been overcome by the darkness of evil. Jesus' light brings life to all people and when we follow him he lights the path ahead of us so that we can see how to live. His light removes the darkness of sin from our lives and from our world. Even though there have been dark times throughout the last 2000 plus years since his birth, Jesus' light has been there showing people the right path to take towards living a better life that will reflect his light for others to follow. John reminds us that we are not the light but that we reflect the light of God – showing others the way to Jesus.

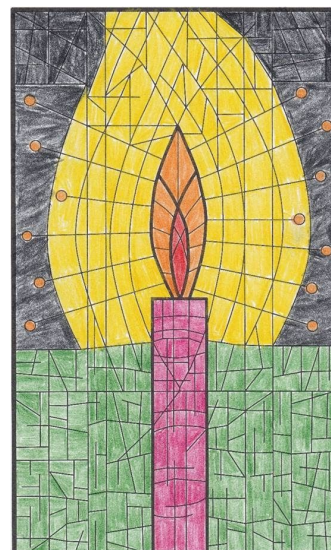
Down the millennia there have been countless numbers of people who have become Christians and followed Jesus faithfully reflecting his light so that others may see his light and find and follow him for themselves. Included among these are people like St Aiden and St Columba who were early Christian missionaries among the Celtic people. Martin Luther, who was credited with starting the protestant reformation, is another example of someone who reflected Christ's light for others as are the Wesley family, especially John and Charles who, whilst at Oxford, set up the Holy Club and together with like-minded friends reflected the light of Christ through their deeds of social action. These are just a few examples, but the list is endless and I'm sure you could add other names to those I've mentioned – maybe people you know who've reflected the light of Christ through volunteering with charities or the uniformed organisations. Maybe those that come to mind may still be reflecting his light as they do things to help others.



There are numerous references to light in the bible including those we've heard this morning. In chapter 8 of John's Gospel Jesus himself says "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world". For me the ideas about Jesus being the light of the world bring to mind Holman Hunt's famous painting *The Light of the World*. The original inspiration for the painting came from a verse from the Revelation: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." This is Jesus' invitation to us all to open our hearts to him and invite him into our lives, letting in the life-light so that we may reflect it out to others. It's the coming of this light as a baby that we celebrate at this time of year.



A few years ago Christian Aid Advent resources included a picture of a lit candle to colour – this is the one I did but I have to confess that I did it in one sitting rather than a little at a time which was the original idea. At the top was a verse from Isaiah “The people walking in darkness have seen a Great light” and the aim was that as the candle was coloured in we reflected on this verse and what we might have done or been doing to bring light – the light of the world - to those who need it. The finished candle reminds us of a light shining in the darkness. Jesus as the light of the world provides us with the challenge of how are we, as individuals and as church communities, going to reflect his light into our community and into the lives of those around us during the coming year. As we stand here this morning 2021 is a blank sheet, how can we use the next 362 days – starting tomorrow- to bring light and spread the news of the Gospel to others?



In verse 14 of our reading this morning we learn that the Word became human and lived a human life like ours, or as Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message “The Word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood” - that phrase really brings it home so to speak, Immanuel - God with us - God has moved into your street or my street – maybe even next door? Jesus the light of the world living amongst us sharing our lives – every bit of them from morning until night, whether we’re at work, at school, retired or doing some form of leisure activity or voluntary service, whether we’re alone or with family and friends.

You might be asking yourself “Where do I find the Word in my neighbourhood?” The writer and member of the Iona Community, Tom Gordon provides us with at least part of the answer in this piece entitled simply entitled “The Word”

What is the Word today?

*It comes to me in the words I read –
from my newspaper’s comment
to my Bible stories;
from my magazine’s trivia
to my prayer book’s depth;
that I might know the Word
in all its present fullness for me, today.*

Does the Word speak today?

*It comes to me in the words I hear –
from the kindness of a friend
to reports on the news;
from morning worship*



*to the laughter of children;
that I might hear the Word
in all its living fullness for me, today.*

Where is the Word found today?

*It comes to me in the streets of my living –
from the wisdom of the prophets
to the instructions of a teacher;
from the admonition of a parent
to the writings of the Saints;
that I might live the Word
in its eternal fullness for me, today.*

The word is all around us in the words and actions of others as well as in ourselves, whatever situation we may find ourselves in. This adds to the earlier challenge for the coming year – can we through our words and actions bring the Word into our neighbourhoods allowing the light of Christ to reflect on others through our daily lives?

Let us sing or listen to our next hymn which reflects the darkness that covers the earth but acknowledges that with the arrival of our Lord Jesus, the light has come to our earth. Darkness like a shroud covers the earth.

Hymn: Darkness like a shroud covers the earth

*Darkness like a shroud covers the earth.
Evil like a cloud covers the people.
But the Lord will rise upon you
and his glory will appear on you,
nations will come to your light.*

*Arise, shine, your light has come,
the glory of the Lord has risen on you!
Arise, shine, your light has come,
Jesus the Light of the world has come.*

*Children of the light, be clean and pure.
Rise, you sleepers, Christ will shine on you.
Take the Spirit's flashing two-edged sword
and with faith declare God's mighty word,
stand up and in his strength be strong.
Arise, shine, your light has come...*

*Here among us now, Christ the Light
kindles brighter flames in our trembling hearts.
Living Word, our lamp, come guide our feet*

Salford Methodist Circuit



*as we walk as one in light and peace
till justice and truth shine like the sun.
Arise, shine, your light has come...*

*Like a city bright so let us blaze;
lights in every street turning night to day.
And the darkness shall not overcome
till the fullness of Christ's kingdom comes,
dawning to God's eternal day.
Arise, shine, your light has come...*

Bible Reading: Matthew 2 : 1 - 12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel"".

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The theme of light links both of our readings today. The light we find in our passage from St Matthew is that of the bright star which appeared in the heavens at the time of Jesus' birth and guided the wise men to Bethlehem to worship him and offer their gifts. God used a bright light in the form of a star to announce the arrival of the Messiah who was to be the light of the world. We sing about this in several carols at this time of year but for me it comes over

Salford Methodist Circuit



most clearly in the chorus of "We Three Kings of Orient are:" – "Star with royal beauty bright, westward leading still proceeding, guide us to your perfect light". That perfect light is of course, the Christ child.

The fact that wise men from the East had been waiting for that star to appear in the sky and then eagerly followed its guiding light to the place where they found Jesus is perhaps the first indication that God intended his Messiah to be for all people, and not just the Jews, because in this passage the wise men represent the Gentiles who would also come to know the love and mercy of God through his Son. The Messiah was to be a light that would attract all people to him from across the world - people of all nations would see his light and glorify God for the gift of his Son.

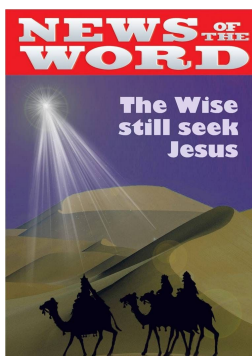
We're not certain how many wise men there were – there could have been three or there could've been more, the numbers don't really matter. What does matter is that they existed because there are relics of the Wise Men in Cologne



Cathedral in Germany where they have been since 1164 when they were acquired by the then Archbishop of Cologne, Rainald of Dassel from the then Holy Roman Emperor. These relics have been of great religious significance and drew pilgrims from all over the Christian world and the building of the current Cathedral in Cologne commenced in 1248 to provide a suitable place of worship in which to house the relics. As I mentioned the number of the wise

men does matter, what does matter is the fact that they sought Jesus and worshipped him and then returned to their homeland or homelands because some people think they came from different countries and met en-route to Bethlehem. Once home they probably told others what they had seen and heard whilst in Bethlehem thus spreading the good news further afield. They were among the first to seek and find the true light of the world.

I referred earlier this morning to some of the countless numbers of people down the millennia who've been wise enough to seek Jesus and then reflect his light to others. Many are well known names in the history of Christianity and the Church but many more are unknown to the world at large, but well known in their local church and in their local community for seeking Jesus and then reflecting his light to others in their own unique ways thus inspiring and influencing many people of the years.



Our 21st century world is, in some places as dark and forbidding as it was at the time of Jesus' birth – you only have to watch or listen to the news bulletins on the radio or the television to understand what I'm getting at – it seems there is more dismal depressing news than good news even at this happy time of year. The revelation of Jesus as the light of the world is needed as much today as it was over 2,000 years



ago. As the current generation of Christ's followers it's up to us to follow the example of the Wise Men and other down the centuries to seek Jesus and then reflect his light to others – pointing them towards him. By doing this we can help to bring his light into our corner of the world. God's kingdom is an all-inclusive one – let's go out into our community, our schools, our workplaces and places of leisure when we are able to and help to make it so here on earth.

Hymn: 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness'

*Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.*

*Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.*

*Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice.
Christ, be our light...*

*Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.
Christ, be our light...*

*Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone.
Christ, be our light...*

*Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
Making your kingdom come.
Christ, be our light...*



Prayer of Intercession

Father God, we come to you with our fears and hopes for 2021.

We bring the things which worry us, the wars unfinished and new wars threatened, the peace treaties not made and the problems unsolved, the people still sick, homeless and hungry, the jobs still not found, and all the other things which make 2021 seem unattractive. We are concerned, Lord, but we go forward, trusting in you.

We bring our hopes for this next year, what we would like to happen and what we believe you would like. We pray for peace, safety and security in all parts of your world, for an end to violence and terrorism, for healing for the sick, food for the hungry and work for the unemployed. We pray for all leaders and all peoples that they may show compassion and be willing to share good things with the less fortunate, so that the food grown on your earth and the know-how for curing or alleviating illness, preventing or coping with disasters may be available to all. Your will be done, Lord.

Please send your Holy Spirit to help us make the world more as you would like it. We know our actions are as important as our prayers. Help us to play our part in making things better for those around us, supporting charities and organisations who do your work in many parts of your world and influencing leaders to lead our country and the world in the way that you would like.

Let us remember, as in a moment we say the prayer that Jesus taught us, that every time we say "our" or "we" or "us" we think both of ourselves and of all the people in your world.

We pray together:

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
For ever and ever.
Amen.*



Hymn: Riding Out Across the Desert

*Riding out across the desert,
travelling over sandy plains,
comes a company of wise men,
moving steadily along their way;
leaving all their friends behind them,
guided by the star so bright,
now they've got to keep on going
must not let the star get out of sight.*

*Riding through the desert, gently the wise men go,
onwards to the king who was promised long ago;
but they don't know where they're going to find him
there's many towns to search
so they'll keep on following the star,
for it will lead them to his place of birth.*

*Wise men on their desert journey,
Travelled many miles so far
though they're getting tired and weary,
town of Bethlehem is not too far:
how they long to worship Jesus
and honour him with royal gifts;
hearts are full of joy and wonder
as they're searching for the new born king.*

*Riding through the desert, gently the wise men go,
onwards to the king who was promised long ago;
but they don't know where they're going to find him
there's many towns to search
so they'll keep on following the star,
for it will lead them to his place of birth.*

Blessing

We stand to face the future:

God behind us in the past;
Christ before us, the way ahead;
Christ beside us in this moment;
Christ beneath us in our weakness;
Christ above us to shield us –
beneath the shadow of his wings we are safe;
Christ between us to bind in the unity of his love;

Salford Methodist Circuit



Christ in us, equipping us with his all-sufficient grace.

Thus armed, guided and protected we face the new year.

Now we arise and go forth on the journey before us,
Knowing that, where Christ leads, life is a journey home.
Therefore we travel in faith, in hope, and in love,
in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

May the blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be upon us
and upon all this year
and to all eternity.
Amen.

CCL: 30925

Joy To The World - Issac Watts

Darkness Like A Shroud - Graham Kendrick

Words and Music: © 1985, Thankyou Music. Administered by worshiptogether.com Songs, excluding UK & Europe, administered by Kingswaysongs, a division of David C Cook tym@kingsway.co.uk

Longing For Light - Bernadette Farrell

Words and Music: © 1993 Bernadette Farrell. Published by OCP Publications, 5536 NE Hasselo. Portland, OR 97213, USA. All rights reserved.

Performed by Jason McMahon

Riding Out Across the Desert - Peter Ratcliffe

Words and Music: © Peter Ratcliffe / Jubilate Hymns, Administered by The Jubilate Group, 4 Thorne Park Road, Torquay TQ2 6RX copyrightmanager@jubilate.co.uk