



"Different Gifts, Different Christmas"

A service sheet to guide reflections on and around Christmas Day 2020 "Happy Christmas!"

Our call to worship: This year at Christchurch through Advent we are thinking about homelessness and hospitality. We are adapting the Candle liturgy that the Methodist Church prepared for 2019. Today we remember the birth of Jesus.

The white central Christmas candle is lit.

We pray Jesus Christ, we welcome you as we arrive at the end of our Advent journey. Your gifts to your people are beyond our wildest dreams. Make your home among us and teach us to be servants to each other, to the homeless and to all in need of your hospitality. Your kingdom come today and for ever.

Jesus Christ, we welcome you. Jesus Christ, we worship you.

We sing the fifth verse of *Longing for 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!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.*

Bernadette Farrell (b. 1957)

Hymn Angels from the realms of glory Singing the Faith 190

A carol that calls us to worship the baby born as King of our lives.

1 Angels, from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth ;
you who sang creation's story,
now proclaim Messiah's birth :
*Come and worship,
Christ the new-born King,
come and worship,
worship Christ, the new-born King.*

2 Shepherds in the field abiding,
watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing,
yonder shines the infant Light :

3 Sages, leave your contemplations ;
brighter visions beam afar ;
seek the great Desire of nations ;
you have seen his natal star :

4 Saints before the altar bending,
watching long in hope and fear,
suddenly the Lord, descending,
in his temple shall appear :

5 Though an infant now we view him,
he shall fill his Father's throne,
gather all the nations to him ;
every knee shall then bow down :

vv. 1-4 James Montgomery (1771-1854)

v. 5, unascrbed text in *The Christmas Box*, 1825

Prayer

Dear God, we have so many things to thank you for. In this moment we pause to recall just some of ways we have been blessed. We remember, as we can, the joys of Christmases past, the hope of Christmases to come and even in this very different time, the signs of your goodness in this present Christmas. Today we offer you all the concerns of our hearts and thank you for giving us your son and showing us how much you love us. **Amen.**

Strange Nativity plays: There are very many kinds of nativity play performed in schools and churches. Sometimes in trying to include as many children as possible there are many new parts. All kinds of animals sometimes appear in the stable. The gifts too can vary. I recall the story of a nativity play where the three kings were dutifully presenting the gifts. The first said, "I bring gold". The second king stepped forward and said "I bring myrrh". Then the third child playing a king stepped forward and looking slightly puzzled, said "And Frank sent this!". Well Frankincense is an usual item especially for a child to think about. In our Bible passage from the Old Testament we hear a number of items mentioned that often appear in nativities.

Bible Reading Isaiah 60: 1-6

Arise, Jerusalem, and shine like the sun;
The glory of the LORD is shining on you!
² Other nations will be covered by darkness,
But on you the light of the LORD will shine;
The brightness of his presence will be with
you.
³ Nations will be drawn to your light,
And kings to the dawning of your new day.
⁴ Look around you and see what is
happening:
Your people are gathering to come home!
Your sons will come from far away;

Your daughters will be carried like children.
⁵ You will see this and be filled with joy;
You will tremble with excitement.
The wealth of the nations will be brought to
you;
From across the sea their riches will come.
⁶ Great caravans of camels will come, from
Midian and Ephah.
They will come from Sheba, bringing gold
and incense.
People will tell the good news of what
the LORD has done!

Comment on the passage: This passage seems to come from a time in Israel's history when there is a moment of peace and hope after much difficulty. It is probable that Ezra has been commissioned to restore the city and the Temple and the Persian emperor has agreed to provide materials and money to make this possible. The camel trains would come from the East, bringing gifts such as gold and incense. After the time of exile and the dashed expectations of earlier rebuilding projects when the first exiles returned home, hopes are now high. Light has come to God's city and God's people. This is a passage that rejoices in what God is about to do. From *Roots on the web*

Bible reading Matthew 2: 1-11

2 Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterward, some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called together all the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?"

⁵ "In the town of Bethlehem in Judea," they answered. "For this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ "Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah;
for from you will come a leader
who will guide my people Israel."

⁷ So Herod called the visitors from the East to a secret meeting and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions: "Go and make a careful search for the child; and when you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹⁻¹⁰ And so they left, and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the East. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹¹ They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshiped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.

Hymn: Come and join the celebration *Singing the Faith 196*

A joyful song that tells the story of the different visitors to the new king.

*Come and join the celebration, it's a very special day ;
come and share our jubilation,
there's a new King born today !*

1 See the shepherds hurry down to Bethlehem,
gaze in wonder at the Son of God who lay before them :

2 Wise men journey, led to worship by a star,
kneel in homage, bringing precious gifts from lands afar, so,

3 'God is with us,' round the world the message bring,
he is with us, 'Welcome,' all the bells on earth are pealing :

Valerie Collison (b. 1933)

Comment

I guess that we are all having a different Christmas this year but I wonder if you can remember ever receiving a very different gift from normal? When I was about eight or nine years old I remember receiving the gift of a bicycle bell for Christmas from a great aunt in Scotland. What made this gift particularly "different" was the fact that I didn't at that time have an actual bicycle for the bell to go onto! It can be a problem to know what to do with a gift that is so "different" to our tastes that it is unwanted. Back when I was minister at Pannal in North Yorkshire, often in January we had an "unwanted gifts" auction which dealt with the problem while raising some funds.

According to the account in Matthew's gospel the gifts that the wise men brought were gold, frankincense and myrrh. These are rather "different" gifts for a baby. Yet gold is an excellent gift for a king, frankincense for a priest, but myrrh? Something for those who are ill or dying? A good gift then for a king who will heal and give his life for his people perhaps. No doubt that was all part of the message being conveyed about Jesus. That different gift of myrrh may help us to remember that even here in the Christmas story, at the happiest moment of new family, life there was a hint of suffering and death.

That connection with what was to come in Jesus' life may be a comfort for us all in this difficult and different year and Christmas. It may be especially so for those who have suffered particularly through loss of work, ill health or bereavement. This Christmas may well be very different in ways that we wish it were not. Perhaps we wish we could swap our Christmas for another, auction it off maybe – like an unwanted gift? But perhaps its worth considering whether the Christmas narratives in the Bible have anything to help us with those feelings.

Today's account from Matthew's gospel is one of the three perspectives we have on the birth of Jesus. Matthew tells us about the star and the wise men. St Luke tells us about the census, the manager and the shepherds. St John tells us more philosophically that Jesus came into the world as the light who was greater than any darkness. Three different perspectives. In Luke's account we read that when the shepherds came and told Mary and Joseph about what the angels had said "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2: 19). Perhaps we can apply the same pondering to the gifts of the wise men. Lots of things did not make sense at the time. It is only in the long-run that we can see meaning and things take their place.

The "long-run" is the perspective that God has of course. It may help us to know that God holds all things together. There is nothing so different that it is not known by God.

Yet, it is difficult for us to make sense of lots of things. Sometimes we just cant' make sense of things. We just have to live with the way that things are different. Not everything can be neatly sewen up together. The Bible stories of Jesus' birth are interestingly different giving us a variety of perspectives. Again, we can perhaps rest easier when we remember that God see and holds all the perspectives.

Every year, even when there is not a pandemic with all of its restrictions, the people of earth all have very different Christmases. This year we are perhaps more united than before because of the pandemic. That sense of unity may be very significant in helping us as we face the prospect of rather different future Christmases because of climate change. Amazingly because of the COVID-19 virus scientists and politicians have worked together like never before to find a vaccine in record time. Gifts of skills and time and money have been shared like never before. It is utterly stunning what human beings can do when we use our God-given gifts to help one another. Might that be one of the positive messages we hold onto this season?

It may be a different Christmas, with different gifts, but God still holds it all and when we recognise the big perspective, we can find our own different place within it and be emboldened to share our treasure and gifts.

A suggestion for a way of praying

Gather your Christmas cards and pray for those who have sent them. Look at the pictures and pray as they inspire you. You could spread this over 12 days of Christmas, taking a few cards each day. Pray also for yourself that Christ may be born in your heart amid all that you are feeling in this special season.

Prayers for others

On people who are alone this season:

Lord, have mercy.

On people who are too sad to celebrate:

Lord, have mercy.

On those without a secure home. **Lord, have mercy.**

On those who do their best to make Christmas better for others:

Lord, have mercy.

On people who have to work over the holidays: **Lord, have mercy.**

On troops serving abroad, and for their

families at home:

Lord, have mercy.

On doctors, nurses and all hospital staff:

Lord, have mercy.

On people who have no work or prospect of work:

Lord, have mercy.

On all who join in thought today to worship you in word and song, in giving and receiving:

Lord, bless everyone, and grant you peace. Amen.

The Lord's prayer

Hymn Hark the Herald Angels sing *Singing the Faith* 202

1 Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.

Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with the angelic host proclaim:
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'

*Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King.*

2 Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!
Hail, the incarnate Deity!

Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel:

3 Hail, the heaven-born Prince of
Peace!

Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that man no more may die,
born to raise the sons of earth,
born to give them second birth:

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Blessing May the God of Christmas bless you, the gift of Jesus rest you, and the beauty of the Holy Spirit possess you, this Christmas and for ever. Amen.