

Welcome to the first Sunday of Christmas and the last Sunday of 2020. It is a very odd time in a very odd year, so we worship God separately yet together, look back and look forward, but just now take time for the present.

“...they shall call him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us’.” Matthew 1:23

Opening Prayer of Praise and Confession

Our praise knows no bounds when we express our adoration of the child, Jesus, as we know that from this unlikely beginning, he will influence the world, show us how to be with one another, sow love, grant peace, allow joy and implant hope in all who call upon his name. And yet, with the heavenly host, the confused shepherds, the awestruck magi we proclaim this wonderful thing that has happened, that God is with us, always.

Forgive us when we forget, when the trapping of Christmas overwhelm us, and we don't remember to look into the heart of the story. Forgive us, we pray, our frustrations with the year past, and our impatience for the year to come. Forgive us, we pray, when we are not as kind and compassionate as we ought to be. Forgive us, we pray, when we forget to bring our sorry to you, for the little things and the bigger things. Forgive us, we pray, when we fall short of our best. May your uplifting forgiveness carry us on to better in your name. through Christ our new-born Saviour. Amen.

Hymn StF 190 / H&P 92

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.*

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

James Montgomery

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

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

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:

Reading 1 – Luke 2: 22 – 38

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Jesus, Holy child, Light of the World,
Thank you for coming to be with us,
one of us, alongside us.

Thank you for coming in such humility,
as a small child, in a forgotten place.

Help me to see the holy possibility
in the small, the hidden, the unspectacular.

Even in me.

Help me I pray, Jesus, Holy child
Light of the World. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Hymn StF 199 / H&P 101

Glory be to God on high,
and peace on earth descend:
God comes down, he bows the sky,
shows himself our friend:
God the invisible appears:
, the blest, the great I AM,
in this vale of tears,
and Jesus is his name.

Him the angels all adored,
their Maker and their King;
tidings of their humbled Lord
they now to mortals bring.
Emptied of his majesty,
of his dazzling glories shorn,
being's source begins to be,
and God himself is born!

See the eternal Son of God
a mortal son of man;
dwelling in an earthly clod,
whom heaven cannot contain!
Stand amazed, ye heavens, at this!
See the Lord of earth and skies;
humbled to the dust he is,
and in a manger lies.

We, earth's children, now rejoice,
the Prince of Peace proclaim;
and heaven's host lift up our voice,
and shout Immanuel's name;
knees and hearts to him we bow;
of our flesh and of our bone,
Jesus is our brother now,
and God is all our own.

Charles Wesley

Reading 2 – Luke 2: 41 – 51

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his

understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

Thoughts

During Advent across the Circuit, we have been looking at hope, joy, love and peace. I believe they are demonstrated again in today's readings.

Simeon and Anna epitomise hope – they have waited into their old age for the promised hope of a Messiah, and they are rewarded with such joy when they encounter the infant Jesus at the Temple.

The love shown in the family when Jesus is lost and then found is plain to see in his parents' anxiety and relief, and finally peace when Jesus explores his vocation in Jerusalem before returning to Nazareth to grow to maturity and begin his ministry. So let's look closer at this latter story of Jesus growing up, the only one we have.

Jesus is 12, on the cusp of Jewish manhood and he is going to Jerusalem, a journey of approximately 90 miles that he has done every year of his life. The family are travelling with relatives and friends, as you would expect, and presumably stayed with friends or relatives when they got there, maybe in the homes of future followers. It would be very crowded, it is, after all Passover and many come to Jerusalem. Jesus would be travelling with his wider family, cousin John (the Baptist) may have been there too, but also as the eldest son in his own family. (Mary eventually has at least five sons and two daughters as referenced in Matthew and Mark's gospels, and it is highly unlikely that as Jesus is 12 years old he doesn't have younger siblings already) So Jesus possibly had some responsibilities for these brothers and sisters as many eldest children do. All is well until it is time to leave after several days of festivities, I can imagine it was chaos, all these people leaving, as all these people arrived, in large groups, all chatting about what they had seen and done, and what they were planning to do on their arrival home.

The journey would have been split, in these days Google maps reckons it's a 31-hour walk, so I suspect that the families would regroup into their households for a meal in the evening and to sleep together. This is the point when Jesus is discovered missing. Mary and Joseph immediately begin to search, getting more and more anxious as he is not found with close family, wider family, friends, others returning to Nazareth. The only thing is to retrace their steps and go back to Jerusalem. Exhausted after a day's journey already they travel back, probably quicker, arriving in the early morning. I expect they would return to where they were staying, asking relatives and friends in Jerusalem if they had seen him. Hopefully these same relatives and friends fed them and made them rest before joining the search. They probably went back to the sights and spectacles to see if Jesus had gone back for another look when it was quieter, but to no avail. Eventually they go to the Temple, maybe to pray for guidance, maybe on a tip off, maybe in sheer desperation, and there he is. Jesus is holding court, gathering a crowd, and not least concerned about being missing for three days, until his parents confront him and berate him in complete loving relief.

I wonder if his response was the sudden realisation that all the amazing things that the shepherds, the magi, Simeon and Anna had said at his birth meant something deeper, and Mary and Joseph's encounter with angels came back to mind and the world changed for them, at that moment.

That wave that comes over you when you know everything is okay again is something we have probably all experienced: when an exam is finished, your tax return is complete, your treatment is done, your journey is ended, you can hug someone you haven't seen in a long time, the thing you held your breath for, put your life on hold for, dreaded and hoped for in equal measure, has reached fruition, and life can move on.

I hope that in this new year, our lives can move on again, we can meet up with those we haven't seen for a while, and hug those we have been keeping 2 metres away from, it will be worth the wait.

During my lockdown walks, I have been listening to various podcasts on my headphones and have recently discovered The History Hour which gives living accounts of a variety of historical events as told by the people who were there. One struck me in particular as I was thinking about this service, a man was telling of when he was a boy in Ethiopia during the political unrest of the early 1990s and his family had a chance to be airlifted out to Israel, before the insurgents arrived. It was a very small window of opportunity and the families were given little notice to carry what they could and be bused to the waiting airplanes. This 10-year-old was separated from his parents and they were only reunited from different planes in Israel. As his mother found him and hugged him, he said it was like they hadn't seen each other for 700 years and it was conveyed in that hug full of all the emotions we have looked at today.

When we are away from those we love, whether deliberately or accidentally, the hug on our return feels like that described. Jesus knew that hug too and understands our deep seated needs, I hope that you find them within yourselves when we rediscover the peace, love, hope and joy of this Christmastide.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, the gospel stories have become so familiar over the years that we accept them almost unthinkingly. Grant that we may be open to their shock value, as well as to the comfort of the news they bring. We pray that we may see the relevance of them in life today, and may extend our compassion to those whose stories resonate with yours.

We pray for those who could not have the Christmas they wished for due to the Coronavirus, due to illness or bereavement, due to being separated from family and friends, due to being afraid or anxious, due to loss of employment and change in circumstances, due to being homeless, alone. We pray for those who still need to be lifted up, to experience hope, love, peace and joy, including ourselves. May we all find what we seek in the Christ who came at Christmas, vulnerable, homeless, but yet born as Saviour of the world.

May God's blessing fall again upon the world. Amen.

Hymn StF197 / H&P98

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!

George Stringer Rowe

Blessing

During this Christmas season
may we remember
the spirit of the season, which is peace;
the gladness of the season, which is hope;
the heart of the season, which is love;
the blessing of the season which is joy. Amen.