

Sunday 25th December – Christmas Day

Led by Sue Nelms, LLM

Opening words

God our Father,
today the Saviour is born
and those who live in darkness are seeing a great light.
Help us, who greet the birth of Christ with joy,
to live in the light of your Son
and to share the good news of your love.
We ask this through Jesus Christ,
the light who has come into the world.

Amen.

Lighting of the Advent candles

**Lord Jesus, Light of light,
you have come among us.
Help us who live by your light
to shine as lights in your world.
Glory to God in the highest.
Amen.**

Hymn – O come, all ye faithful

sung by St Martin's Voices

- I 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.
 Chorus:
 O come, let us adore him,

O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord.

2 God of God, Light of Light;
lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb;
very God,
begotten not created;
Chorus

3 Sing, choirs of angels,
sing in exultation,
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God
in the highest:
Chorus

4 Yea, Lord, we greet thee,
born this happy morning;
Jesus, to thee be all glory given;
word of the Father,
now in flesh appearing;
Chorus

Translated from the Latin (18th century) by Frederick Oakely (1802-1880) (CCLI 5386491, OL 08975)

Confession

Christ the light of the world has come
to dispel the darkness of our hearts.
In his light let us examine ourselves and confess our sins.

You were born for our salvation:
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

You came as Saviour to bring wholeness and peace:
Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

You come to bring light into the darkness of our lives:
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

May God who loved the world so much
that he sent his Son to be our Saviour,
forgive us our sins
and make us holy to serve him in the world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Readings - Read by John Crang

Isaiah 52:7-10

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.

⁹ Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰ The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

John 1:1-14 - The Word Became Flesh

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Hymn – O little town of Bethlehem

sung by St Martin's Voices

- 1 O little town of Bethlehem,
 how still we see thee lie!
 Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
 the silent stars go by.
 Yet in thy dark streets shineth
 the everlasting light;
 the hopes and fears of all the years
 are met in thee tonight.

- 2 O morning stars, together
 proclaim the holy birth,
 And praises sing to God the King,
 and peace to men on earth;

For Christ is born of Mary;
and gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.

3 How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

4 O holy Child of Bethlehem
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in,
be born to us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell:
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel.

Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) (CCLI 7004604, OL 194334)

Reflection by Rev David Newton

All swans are white, right. That's what people in the West thought until they landed on the shores of Australia in the 17th Century. Until that moment all evidence pointed to the fact that all swans were white. As the people of England strolled along the Thames or the Ouse every swan they had ever seen was white.

So, imagine their surprise when the first Europeans came upon the shores of Australia and discovered black swans. The aboriginals thought nothing of it, but these folk from Europe couldn't believe their eyes. No amount of repeated observation back in Europe could ever have prepared them for that discovery. Here was something entirely new, entirely unpredictable.

Surprise.

Just over a decade ago Nassim Taleb wrote a book simply entitled *The Black Swan* that became a bit of a bestseller. Launching from the story of the black swan, he suggests that the currents of history are governed by the unpredictable, the unknowable, the extreme and surprising events. Looking back, we might be able to see connections, explanations and reasons for x leading to y and then z. But these explanations are primarily formed after the fact. Most of the time, the ark of history takes surprising, unpredictable, and unknowable turns because of what he terms, 'black swan' events.

The fall of the USSR, the discovery of penicillin, the rise of Christianity. All of these were black swans.

The financial crash? The pandemic? These were perhaps more predictable in some ways. But the timing of them was not. Nor their impact, nor governments reactions and the paths taken.

Even if a pandemic was predicted by some, no one expected their own last 2 years to look like they have done. Lives have been turned upside down, for ill and for good. Lives have been re-directed and re-shaped in all sorts of way. The unpredictable, unknowable, and surprising have created the context for – and possibly also the content of – our lives. The ultimate black swan event, in these terms, is – for us as Christians – the birth of Christ.

Whilst we read the Hebrew Scriptures and see his birth foretold, this is really an explanation after the fact. In light of Christ we go, of course, 'Long ago, prophets knew'! But you can't really say that what unfolded was expected. Here was something entirely new, unpredictable, surprising, a black swan.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The 'Reason' behind the universe, that which made something out of nothing, the Love behind it all, this 'Word' ... came down beside us. The creator took the form of a creature.

One night, as shepherds above the hills of Bethlehem were watching the sheep, something unexpected and utterly unpredictable happened. Angels appeared in the sky declaring 'glory to God in the highest and peace to his people of earth'. A star guided them to a shed, to a manger and a baby. Nothing made them ready for that night. Nothing could have led those Shepherd to expect such a dazzling display in the

sky. Nothing could have led them to know that that night would turn history upside down.

Sheer Surprise.

As a culture I'm not sure we like surprises very much. We like everything to be ordered, controllable and predictable. As those with a pretense to be gods we like to be able to control everything around us, make it work to our timing and in our way. We exercise increasing control over our environment, we're able to turn lights on and play music with a simple voice command, we're able to turn the heating on miles from home. We're able (changing the tone a bit) to control an unmanned drone over Pakistan from the safety of the Arizonan desert. We're playing at being gods in a world we think we control.

Of course, we don't.

Life is still unpredictable and uncertain. Sometimes it is unpredictable in ways that are deeply tragic: we lose a friend or family member unexpectedly; we lose a job; we get a bad hospital diagnosis. And sometimes life throws us surprises that are deeply joyful: we receive a little gift, we're blessed with a new friendship, we discover a new hobby.

Whilst the uncertainty of life certainly cuts both ways, a life without surprise would not be a good thing at all. We need uncertainty.

First, it reminds us that we are not gods. We are creatures who do not control the world, but are part of it, interdependent within it and so subject to all sorts of things happening to us. Surprises remind us that we are creatures. The shepherds were humbled and in awe on that hillside... but any surprise brings us down to size.

Second, uncertainty takes us out of the little cocoons that we build for ourselves. Surprises forces us to re-think, re-evaluate. Surprises get us out of our set routines and help us see the world anew.

And thirdly, and most importantly, uncertainty – and the surprises that come because of it – lift our eyes heavenward. God is the God of surprises.

Yes, God sustains the laws that govern the universe. God makes the sun rise and stars shine. God sustains the stability that we rely on. God is the God of the ordinary, mundane, and routine.

And yet, God is also the one who surprised creation by becoming a creature. God is the one who brings life out of death. God is the one who brought Israel out of slavery. God is the one who re-makes us and transforms us, who can redeem even the darkest and most corrupt of souls.

God is full of surprises.

Which is another way of saying that there is always hope. Just because things have always been a certain way doesn't mean they always have to be. Cycles of oppression can be broken. Rhythms of destruction can be overturned.

Into a world of systematic oppression and injustice God made a surprise appearance and turned the world upside down.

At its heart Christmas is about the greatest surprise of all – the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us – and that surprise changes everything. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith

Let us declare our faith in God:

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession led by Deborah Spencer

Let us pray

Yea Lord, we greet thee born this happy morning; Jesus to thee be the glory given.

We thank you for bringing us all here together for the joyous occasion of Christmas Day and the opportunity to be able to meet with each other, albeit virtually.

We pray for the difficult times we are in; we ask for guidance and strength to navigate the next few weeks. We thank you for all those going above and beyond this Christmas. For those who work in the NHS but also all those that have volunteered to help with the vaccination programme.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who are unable to spend Christmas together as they are isolating or being cautious. We hope that all people will experience some of the Christmas joy and the knowledge of the birth of our saviour.

Let us make this season happy and bright, let us thank God for all we have, for our families, neighbours, and friends, let us bring joy to those who are finding life a struggle.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our Bishops, clergy and lay ministers and ask you to be with them at this busy time of the year. We thank you for their commitment and ministry in these times. We pray especially this morning for our Curate Paul, who is leaving us to take up his role as an Army Chaplain. We pray that you will bless him, Sonia and Olli and that they in their turn will be a blessing to the people they meet and support.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We think about those who are sick in body, mind or soul and we ask for your healing presence that they too may enjoy Christmas. Dear Lord, we remember all those who have gone before us. At this time of year, we particularly remember all those dear to us and we pray for

people who are lonely and find Christmas difficult without their loved ones. We remember our dear friend Faye; we give all our love and prayers to her family at this sad time. Lord, please keep her in the palm of your hand.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Dear Lord, this time is precious to us all, help us to remember the true meaning of Christmas in all that we do during this Christmas time.

Pour your blessings on this Zoom congregation and those who will be meeting in church buildings. We ask for your presence at all the services taking place across the team today.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord, make us a channel of your peace, where there is hatred, let us bring your love, where there is injury pardon Lord, and where there is doubt, true faith in you. Where there is despair in life, let us bring hope. Where there is darkness only light and where there is sadness, ever joy.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Collect

Lord Jesus Christ,
your birth at Bethlehem
draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth:
accept our heartfelt praise as we worship you,
our Saviour and our eternal God. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Rejoicing in the presence of God here among us,
as our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**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 forever. Amen.**

Hymn – Hark the Herald Angels Sing

sung by St Martin's Voices

- 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 the Virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!
Hail the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel:
Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!
- 3 Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son 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:
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the new-born King!"

Charles Wesley (1707-1788) (CCLI 5386491, OL 08975)

Conclusion

May God the Father, judge all-merciful,
make us worthy of a place in his kingdom.

Amen.

May God the Son, coming among us in power,
reveal in our midst the promise of his glory.

Amen.

May God the Holy Spirit make us steadfast in faith,
joyful in hope and constant in love.

Amen.

And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always. **Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

In the name of Christ. Amen