

Prelude: 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' played on piano by Kate Rogers

Welcome, and announcements

Good afternoon and welcome everyone to our Carol Service – its wonderful to see so many you here. Before we start the service itself, a few announcements:

>This afternoon's service will include readings and sung items as shown in your order of service. Everyone is welcome to join in singing the carols and the words will appear on the screen except for Carol 5, words on service sheet. Kate, our pianist for today, will play piano for Carol no 5. All Carols are from the Green Hymn book

After the Service, please do join us for mince pies and hot drinks in our Hall, and the Raffle Draw On your way out to the Hall, is a basket for our retiring collection in aid of Children's Hospice South West.

Before we light our candles, a word of thanks to all who have contributed in any way to tonight's service, including 'back room' helpers without whose efforts things would not happen so smoothly – if at all. So thank you all, and now we will begin by lighting our Chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith.

Lighting the Chalice

Let us kindle within our hearts a gladdening flame, that we may fling against the bleakness of the long cold night's distress, and against the depths of human misery and despair, lives new born in love, goodwill and mercy, toward all people, everywhere. *Barrows Dunham (Adapted)*

Let Christmas come, its story told,
When days are short and winds are cold,
Let Christmas come, its lovely song,
When evening's soon and night is long.

Let Christmas come, its great star glow,
On quiet city, parks of snow;
Let Christmas come, its table gleam,
Love born again: the truth of dream. *John Hanley Morgan*

Prayers: let us turn to a time of prayer and reflection:

1st Prayer

We come together to celebrate the birth of Jesus and to gain fresh inspiration from the traditions and insights of this season of Christmas.

Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, let us acknowledge humbly and thankfully the wonder that is always present in the gift of life itself ...

Like the shepherds in the fields, may our hearts be open as it were, to receive the good tidings of the angles and to believe that peace on earth and goodwill towards men and women is possible, and that it can begin with us, where we are....

Like the wise men, may we, from the richness of our lives, be prepared to give generously and to go to great lengths to serve the highest that we know in our experience....

May we too, have a vision of a star in those ideals in life which are always in front of us, guiding us; may our star be the truth in all our thinking,

And the strength in all our doing

And the light and warmth in all our relationships

By its guidance may we find enough wisdom to live thoughtfully,

Enough faith to live from the depth of our being and enough love to live generously *AMEN*

2nd Prayer

Let us hold in our loving thoughts, all those for who this will not be the happiest of Christmasses – the sad or lonely, those whose lives have been touched by illness or the loss of a dear one ...

those who have lost their homes or livelihoods ...

those living in hunger and fear and in places where there is war, or terror from human or natural causes ...

May we even in some tiny way, be able to contribute towards whatever help is most appropriate, and so share the true spirit of Christmas *AMEN*

1st CAROL – no. 82 ‘People look East’

People, look east! The time is near
of the crowning of the year.

Make your house fair as you are able,
trim the hearth, and set the table.

People, look east, and sing today:

Love, the guest, is on the way.

Furrows, be glad! Though earth is bare,
one more seed is planted there:

give up your strength the seed to nourish,
that, in course, the flower may flourish.

People, look east, and sing today:

Love, the rose, is on the way.

Stars, keep the watch! When night is dim,
one more light the bowl shall brim,

shining beyond the frosty weather,
bright as sun and moon together.

People, look east, and sing today:

Love, the star, is on the way.

French carol, Music: ‘Besancon Carol, Har. John Stainer 1840 – 1901

Words Eleanor Farjeon, 1881 – 1965 from Oxford Book of Carols by permission of David Higham Associates, Ltd.

Our first pair of readings foretell the coming of Jesus: a piece from Hebrew Bible aka the 'Old Testament' and a modern poem by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury

Fortelling the coming of Jesus Isaiah 11 New King James Version

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse,
And a Branch shall grow out of his roots.
The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him,
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

His delight is in the fear of the Lord,
And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes,
Nor decide by the hearing of His ears;
But with righteousness He shall judge the poor,
And decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth,
And with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins,
And faithfulness the belt of His waist.
The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf
and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze;
Their young ones shall lie down together; And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole,
And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den.

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain,
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
As the waters cover the sea.

'Advent Calendar' by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury

He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to the bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.

2nd CAROL – no. 85 ‘O little town of Bethlehem’

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 street shineth
The everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

O morning stars, together
Proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King,
And peace throughout the earth:
For Christ is born of Mary –
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The peace and joy of 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.

Music: ‘Forest Green’, English Traditional melody Coll..Adapt & arr Ralph Vaughan Williams 1872 – 1958
Words: from Phillips Brooks, 1835 - 1893

Our next 3 readings take us forward in time to the birth of Jesus: a reading from the New Testament and two modern poems:

READINGS:

Luke 2:1-7 - The journey to and arrival in Bethlehem New King James Version

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Poem 'Cradle song' by William Blake, 1757 –1827

Sleep, sleep, beauty bright,
Dreaming in the joys of night;
Sleep, sleep; in thy sleep
Little sorrows sit and weep.

Sweet babe, in thy face
Soft desires I can trace,
Secret joys and secret smiles,
Little pretty infant wiles.

As thy softest limbs I feel
Smiles as of the morning steal
O'er thy cheek, and o'er thy breast
Where thy little heart doth rest.

O the cunning wiles that creep
In thy little heart asleep!
When thy little heart doth wake,
Then the dreadful night shall break.

Poem 'BC:AD' by U.A. Fanthorpe

This was the moment when before turned into after
And the future's uninvented time-keepers
Presented arms.

This was the moment when
Nothing happened.
Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even the energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than count heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment when a few farm workers
And three members of an obscure Persian sect
Walked, haphazard by starlight,
Straight into the Kingdom of Heaven.

3rd CAROL no. 84 'While Shepherds watched'

While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around.

"Fear not", said he (for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind),
"Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind.

"To you, in David's town this day
Is born of David's line
A Saviour, who is Christ the Lord;
And this shall be the sign:

"The heavenly Babe you there shall find
To human view displayed,
All meanly wrapped in swathing bands,
And in a manger laid".

Thus spake the Seraph; and forthwith
Appeared a shining throng
Of angels, praising God, and thus
Addressed their joyful song:

"All; glory be to God on high,
And to the earth be peace;
Goodwill henceforth from heaven to men
Begin and never cease!"

Music: 'Winchester Old' Este's Psalter, 1592

Words: Nathan Tate, 1652 – 1715

Our next pair of readings tell us of the role of the shepherds - and their dog.

READINGS: Luke 2:8-20 'The Shepherds' (New International Version)

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

Poem: 'The Sheepdog' by U.A. Fanthorpe (1929-2009)

After the very bright light,
And the talking bird,
And the singing,
And the sky filled up wi' wings,
And then the silence,

Our lads sez
"We'd better go, then.
Stay, Shep. Good dog, stay."
So I stayed wi' t' sheep.

After they cum back,
It sounded grand, what they'd seen:
Camels, and kings, and such,
Wi' presents – human sort,
Not the kind you eat –
And a baby. Presents was for him.

Our lads took him a lamb.
I had to stay behind wi' sheep.
Pity they didn't tek me along, too.
I'm good wi' sheep,
And the baby might have liked a dog
After all that myrrh and such.

4th CAROL no. 91 'It came upon the midnight clear'

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth
To touch their hearts of gold:
"Peace to the earth, goodwill to all,
From heaven's all gracious King!"
The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come,
With peaceful wings unfurled;
And still their heavenly music floats O'er all the weary world.
Above its sad and lowly plains
They bend on hovering wing,
And ever o'er its babel sounds
The blessèd angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long:
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And those who are at war hear not
The love- song which they bring:
O hush the noise, all ye of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow:
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!

For lo! The days are hastening on,
By prophet-bards foretold,
When, with the ever-circling years,
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world send back the song
Which now the angels sing.

Music: 'Noel' Traditional Air adapted by Arthur Seymour Sullivan, 1842 – 1900

Words: from Edmund Hamilton Sears, 1810 - 1876

Our next pair of readings continues the story with a Biblical account of the visitation of the Three kings and King Herod's wicked intentions, which led to the Holy family fleeing as refugees to safety in Egypt. Our second of the pair is a modern poem giving voices to a refugee family

READINGS: Matthew 2: 1-14 'The three kings' New King James version

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;
For out of you shall come a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.' "

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

The Flight into Egypt

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

Poem, 'Refugee Carol'

I am weary, father; the way is long.

Tell me a story. Sing me a song.

What story, my son? what song?

A refugees story is grief to tell.

A refugee's tune is the curfew bell

And his song is the word, 'farewell' my son

The word, 'farewell'

How bright the moon is, how cold and bright.

Will there be bombers, father, tonight?

No bombers, my son, tonight.

Tonight is Christmas and all men are

Travelling like us from far and far

To a stable under a star, my son,

Under a star.

A stable, father? Do we go there?

No! No! It's a trap, a snare!

No snare, my son, no snare.

The light streams out from the open door

And footprints tell me on the dusty floor

That many have been before, my son,

Many before.

But it's empty, father, everyone's gone,

How soft the hay is for sleeping on.

Sleep on, my son, sleep on.
Sleep where the son of God once lay,
Young like you on his bed of hay,
Sleep till the break of day, my son,
Till the break of day.

Our oldest member Ralph Brown, who died so recently wrote words to our next Carol, reflecting on the state of our world today, but ending on a hopeful note. Ralph's words are in your order of service leaflet. Ralph's family have kindly brought his Floral tribute, which is at the front.

5th CAROL 'On this circling planet' Ralph Brown's words, to the Tune 'In the Bleak Midwinter' ('Cranham') Piano played by Kate Rogers

On this circling planet
Tiny speck in space
Dwell the teeming myriads
Of the human race;
Each one needing food and warmth
Shelter, raiment, rest;
Each new crying infant
Seeks its mother's breast.

Millions now are hungry,
Hounded, wretched, poor,
Spirits crushed by sorrow,
Bodies thin and sore;
Each new day brings added care,
Each new child fresh pains,
Often hope has vanishes,
Only grief remains.

We who live in comfort
Sheltered, clothed and fed
Yet find small contentment
Still by greed we're led,
Every new possession grasped
Makes us covet more,
Recklessly we squander
Nature's dwindling store.

At this Christmas season,
May we hear again
The old angelic anthem,
'Peace, goodwill to men';
Bidding us to turn our thoughts
From selfishness and greed
And mitigate each's sorrow,

And succour those in need.

Thus the ancient story
Telling Jesus' birth
Stirs the soul's deep longings
Peace and hope and mirth.
Love, though scourged and crucified,
Battered, bleeding, torn,
Is born again in beauty
Every Christmas morn.

Words by Ralph Brown, 1922 - 2025

**Time for some Silence, approx. 1 ½ minutes, followed by
PIANO MUSIC for REFLECTION : 'Oh Holy Night' Played by Kate Rogers**

'Some Seasonal Thoughts' by Sheila

"We come together in worship to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and to gain fresh inspiration from the traditions and insights of this season of Christmas...." so began one of our prayers tonight.

I think it's fair to say that many of our congregation are at best "sceptical" about the historical accuracy of the Nativity stories, which we have heard in our service this afternoon. They may be regarded as mythical accounts devised by early Christians attempting to explain their new belief system: that Jesus had been God. This was in keeping with the ways of that time: to ascribe divine status to great warriors and rulers, marking them out as being extra-special, elevated above the common people.

Scholars, academics and astronomers have studied these accounts, over many years, and it is now generally accepted that while no-one is sure of the exact date of the birth of Jesus, it is very unlikely to have been December 25th. It is likely this date was chosen by the early Christian church, to accommodate the Pagan celebrations of the Winter Solstice, one of the great turning points of the year. Just when the Sun was at its lowest ebb, with the daylight hours, to the anxiety of the ancient peoples, dwindling to complete darkness, there is an upward turn, and ever so gradually, the days lengthen and the Light is reborn.

So, are we being hypocritical by retelling these ancient stories, myths, legends, call them what you will? and to celebrate Christmas? No, for they apply not just to the Christian experience, but for all humanity.

Whats at the heart of these stories, their very essence, is as relevant today as ever it was ... The account of a homeless family seeking somewhere – anywhere - to stay at the time of their greatest need, rings as true in our modern towns and cities as it did two thousand years ago. As does the fate of countless refugees, fleeing threats to their very existence: a tyrant's persecution against the background of civil unrest or an occupying army, or in these modern times, the effects of climate change.

And how little acts of kindness, like offering a humble shelter to that family, or choosing not to tell the tyrant where the refugees could be found – how the best of humanity's acts can overcome the worst - and then, we see the relevance of that two thousand year old story today.

Add to that, the idea of more than a few, that within each of us, there is the spark of the Divine, God, call it what you will. As the eminent Unitarian theologian, James Martineau wrote over 100 years ago, "The incarnation is true, not of Christ exclusively, but of (hu) man universally and God everlastingly" or as Sophia Fahs Lyons wrote :

"Each night a child is born is a holy night,
A time for singing,
A time for wondering,
A time for worshipping" ... and so we have, sung, wondered, worshipped and celebrated this wonderful story. And so may it ever be - *AMEN*

Our final two readings

READINGS: Poem: 'Minstrels' by William Wordsworth

The minstrels played their Christmas tune
To-night beneath my cottage-eaves;
While, smitten by a lofty moon,
The encircling laurels, thick with leaves,
Gave back a rich and dazzling sheen,
That overpowered their natural green.

Through hill and valley every breeze
Had sunk to rest with folded wings:
Keen was the air, but could not freeze,
Nor check, the music of the strings;
So stout and hardy were the band
That scraped the chords with strenuous hand.

And who but listened? — till was paid
Respect to every inmate's claim,
The greeting given, the music played
In honour of each household name,
Duly pronounced with lusty call,
And "Merry Christmas" wished to all.

Reading: 'Now the work of Christmas begins', by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

6th CAROL no. 96 ' Joy to the world'

Joy to the world, for peace shall come:
Let this be our refrain!
In every heart, in every land,
Let peace and freedom reign!
Let peace and freedom reign!
Let peace and love and freedom reign!

Joy to the earth where truth is all,
And justice our domain!
In every mind, in every word,
Let peace and freedom reign!
Let peace and freedom reign!
Let peace and love and freedom reign!

Joy to our hearts, good-will to all!
The earth, the world shall ring
With deeds of love, with songs of praise:
 Let peace and freedom reign!
Let peace and freedom reign!
Let peace and love and freedom reign!

Music: 'Antioch' Lowell Mason, 1792 – 1872

Words: from William Wolff after Isaac Watts, 1674 – 1748 by permission of the Hodgkin Press, Los Angeles.

Blessing:

May the love of this season be with us through all the days of the year and give us strength and courage and faith.

May the Peace of this season be ever in us and bring us comfort and hope. May the light of this season shine in our hearts and bring us happiness and laughter. May the joy that is in us be shared with others.

Kenneth W. Phifer

Extinguish CHALICE

CLOSING MUSIC: Piano played by Kate Rogers, 'Carol of the Bells'