

22nd December, 2024

The paper-version Service



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe, light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's Service.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Hymn:

The first Nowell the angel did say
was to certain poor shepherds in
fields as they lay,
in fields where they lay keeping their
sheep,
on a cold winter's night that was so
deep.

Refrain:

Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,
born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star
shining in the east beyond them far;
and to the earth it gave great light,
and so it continued both day and
night.

[Refrain]

And by the light of that same star
three wise men came from country
far;

to seek for a king was their intent,
and to follow the star wherever it
went. [Refrain]

This star drew nigh to the northwest;
o'er Bethlehem it took its rest,
and there it did both stop and stay,
right over the place where Jesus lay.
[Refrain]

Then entered in those wise men
three,
full reverently upon their knee,
and offered there in his presence
their gold, and myrrh, and
frankincense.

[Refrain]

Then let us all with one accord
sing praises to our heavenly Lord,
that hath made heaven and earth of
nought,
and with his blood our life hath
bought.

[Refrain]

The Sermon by Robert Hughes

Read Hebrews 10.5-10 Luke 1.39-55 – Being blessed, being born

Something over 2000 years ago a major event took place, a miracle happened - Christmas. And (in a manner of speaking) it has happened every year since. Whatever life is like for us, wherever we are on the Earth, however preoccupied we might be by with the demands of our existence, pretty much everyone comes to know about Christmas eventually!. Even those without religion know of it. Indeed, these days it would be hard to avoid knowing about it.

There is something about that story of Jesus' coming to Earth at Christmas that awakens our senses to those around us. You might say its an excuse to eat and drink. And of course it is. But, deep down, the picture we have of a miraculous birth, of a helpless child, lit by the light of a warm fire, held in the arms of a loving mother, safe and secure, a proud and protective father standing close at hand, speaks wordlessly of our own desire for peace - freedom to hope, freedom to dream.

We too, were helpless infants. But look at us now! Despite appearances, we are probably at various stages of Christmas exhaustion. And maybe the gift we crave for most is an early night - and deep untroubled sleep.

Yet to my eyes, there is something about the first Christmas, the Christmas *Mary* experiences, that holds a mirror to events in my own life. I see her in my imagination walking home after a visit to her cousin, Elizabeth, thinking about the miracle in her stomach; wondering about the unseen infant that will accompany her for a while everywhere she goes - the new and growing life she is bringing to this world. Her thoughts bring a joy tempered by fear. Life is fragile - dangers lie hidden in the future. Every parent, every child, knows that anxiety. We must all learn how to adjust to it.

Yet Mary has an undeniable sense of the miracle within her. How could she not! For her, what is 'impossible' is now everyday reality. There's no point asking herself: How did I get pregnant? Nevertheless, pregnancy raises questions for every mother; how will the child change her life? Every new life comes bearing responsibilities others must take. And Earthly reality is no easy place in to pitch our temporary tents. (Remember Matthew tells us that not long after Jesus' birth that they had to flee to Egypt to escape the danger posed by king Herod's paranoia). Maybe living ought to be easier, but it isn't.

As Mary walks back to her home, she is also thinking about the child her elderly cousin Elizabeth has conceived - hardly a natural conception either, she thinks! But then perhaps it dawns on her that every birth is a miracle - somehow life comes to us 'against all odds'. For, like us, she has been taught that it's God's 'breath' - the

life he breathed into our substance in the moment of conception - that brings us to life. Without that 'breath', that energy, that force of life, we'd be reduced to inanimate particles - dust under foot. It's a realisation that recalls words from John's gospel, words resonating with Christmas:

'To all who received him (Jesus) he gave the right to become children of God - children *born not of natural descent*, nor of human decision, nor of a husband's will, but born of God.'

Mary's Christmas will bring an unfathomable God miraculously closer to every one of us in Jesus made flesh. But as you hear to me now - think how he has brought life to you; remember your mysterious nature, your incalculable value in the eyes of God.

Mary's Son receives the solid form that permits him to enter physically into a physical world - in the same way as you and me. The life God breathed into his Son allowed Jesus to live as a miracle in a miraculous world - indivisible spirit and body, in the same way as you and me. And though we are as far from God as Jesus is close, Christmas is a constant reminder that we are integral to God's miracle of Creation - miracles of indivisibility ourselves, inseparable, unique, necessary; God-made, body and spirit together as one.

Have you seen that Jesus becomes a constant encouragement in others' lives? The infant entrusted to Mary is born to champion life, to be it's foremost 'Ambassador, a living example of the goodness embodied by God's miracle. Compared with him, we fall well short. But to focus on that is to miss the point of Jesus entirely. Jesus' Christmas coming expresses God's solidarity with us - demonstrates God's total commitment to what he has made in us: If we allow it to do so, Christmas will awaken our sense of our selves as undivided, as spiritual and physical beings - leaving winter darkness behind, embracing our need of The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, embracing our need of one another.

Why did God choose Mary to give birth to his Son, Jesus? After all, as she acknowledges, she has no special fame or rank. Was it really because she was perfect; or was it her willingness to listen - her capacity to hear, to receive praise and affirmation, the drew Him to her? Why otherwise would he open his mouth to her?

A few short years ago, John and Julia Yeadon began inviting others to meet to share 'Coffee & Questions'. To hear how they tackled the huge subject of Creation left a huge impression on my mind: It went something like this:

We remember - though it's sometimes easy to forget - we exist as body *and* spirit. So, given our physical shape, even were we to travel at the speed of light, it would take us 1.3 seconds to reach the moon, 8.3 minutes to arrive at the sun, 2000 years to escape the Milky Way, and 90 billion years to reach edge of the known universe. And yet, being both body and spirit, there is no physical distance between God and

us. In prayer, in less than the blink of an eye, we are with God in spirit - in the arms of love.

So, before you retire to bed on Christmas Eve, when your preparations are complete, draw aside your curtain and look heavenward. Remember the awe inspiring mystery lying above the clouds, beyond the furthest light: Believe in the miracle whose evidence is all around us. The greatest enemy of faith is certainty. Faith walks hand in hand with doubt.

Only the love within us explains the force of life we have received - the incarnation of Christ Jesus, the generous hand of God by our side as we peer into the night's silence: Listen, and like Mary, you might hear his voice. 'Emmanuel... .. I am here!'

4th Sunday of Advent: God our redeemer, who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the mother of your Son: grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour, so we may be ready to greet him when he comes again as our judge; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer: *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.*

Blessing to be declared over yourselves, St Andrews and The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

At the Church of the Good Shepherd

- Tea and Chat: January 15th at 2pm in the Church Hall.
- Tea and Bowls: January 15th at 2pm in the Church.
- Coffee and Questions: January 22nd at 10.30am in the Church Hall.
- The Community Cupboard, 2:45pm every Thursday in Church.

For Further information:

This paper and all parish details are on the website at <https://www.parihofmedsteadandfourmarks.co.uk>