



The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk  
Christ Church United Reformed Church  
The United Reformed Church in Chappel

Sunday 26th December 2021

Call to Worship:

We waited.  
**And imagined a Messiah.**  
We imagined power.  
**One like the world but stronger and on our side.**  
We imagined a king on a white horse wielding a sword.  
**We got a baby born in a stable among the livestock.**  
We imagined the work done for us  
through the destruction of our enemies.  
**We receive a baby who will teach us our calling  
to seek reconciliation and to love extravagantly.**  
Praise be to God for the unexpected babe of Bethlehem.  
**Praise to the wisdom of love. Amen!**

Prayer/Meditation:

We greet your coming, God, with wonder:  
You come to be with us;  
yet you remain far greater than we can imagine.  
You are near;  
yet your wisdom sets you apart from us.  
You appear among us;  
yet we cannot describe your glory.

We greet your coming, God, with repentance:  
We are more-or-less satisfied with ourselves;  
but your presence exposes our sin and failure.  
We are self-confident;  
but you challenge our confidence in ourselves.  
We are proud of our understanding;  
but you show us that we do not know everything.

We greet your coming, God, with joy:  
We had no true idea of what you are like;  
but you have shown us yourself in Jesus Christ.

We are aware of the gulf between us and you;  
but you have bridged it with love.

God, we greet your coming in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Let the love that shaped earth and heaven  
dwell within us this Christmas.  
Let the love that created humanity  
dwell within us this Christmas.  
Let the love that overcomes suffering and hatred  
dwell within us this Christmas.  
Let the love that causes us to rejoice with loved ones  
dwell within us this Christmas.  
Let the love that forgives and renews  
dwell within us this Christmas.  
Let the love that brings reconciliation after separation  
dwell within us this Christmas.  
Let the love that brings the blessing of peace  
dwell within us this Christmas.  
And may we share that peace  
with all people near and far.

***Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen***

Reading: Luke 2:1-8

Hymn 155:

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, who 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!'

Reading: Luke 2:9-20

Reflection:

Luke's story of the birth of Jesus is full of little clues that help us to draw a picture of the way things were in society at the time, and we'll have a quick look at two of these clues today: the inn at Bethlehem and the shepherds in the fields.

Luke gives some details about a census which was the reason that Joseph had to go to Bethlehem, and from the records that the Romans kept, we discover that a census was held in 8BCE. That may have been the year Jesus was born. Joseph and Mary had to travel for the census from Nazareth where they lived, to Bethlehem, Joseph's home town. The distance they had to go was about 80 miles. That doesn't sound like much to us nowadays - you could drive it in an hour and a half or so. For Mary and Joseph, travelling on foot or, if we follow the tradition, riding on a donkey, the journey would have taken four or five days or maybe even a week. It must have been a very uncomfortable journey, and things were no better once they arrived in Bethlehem, for they discovered that there was nowhere for them to stay. There was no room for them at the inn.

The word 'inn' conjures up an image for people today, especially young people, of something akin to a roadside restaurant with a motel at the back. Maybe if we put our minds to it and think back in time we'd come up with something like a modern day country pub, something that's literally a public house, with public rooms downstairs and bedrooms upstairs. But that would be wrong too, for conditions in Bethlehem all those years ago would have been far more primitive. The Bethlehem inn would be nothing more than a covered courtyard with smaller areas like stalls opening from it. The people who stayed there would have to provide their own food; the inkeeper gave them only somewhere to sleep, fodder for their animals, and the use of cooking facilities. But even this primitive accommodation wasn't available.

This detail Luke gives us, that there was no room for them in the inn - is a clue, a symbol of what was to become of Jesus. He spent his life searching for a way into the hearts and minds of men and women, but found at the end that only on the cross was there room for him.

It sets the mood for Jesus' whole life that the first announcement of his birth should come to shepherds and not to the respectable religious people of the day. Shepherds were not popular people among the devoutly religious Jews. They worked with animals, and their job took up so much of their time that they were often unable to participate in all the religious ceremonies and rituals of the faith. They were looked down on as being dirty and disreputable, but it was to them that God's message first came.

And that too is a clue, a symbol. It stresses for us that Jesus was born into the world not for the rich or powerful but for the poor and humble and ordinary, and even for those who are despised and outcast.

These shepherds were out in the fields going about their shepherding in the night when an angel from God showed up and the blazing white light of the glory of God lit up the

landscape. Luke tells us the shepherds, "...were terrified..." The old King James version has this familiar phrase, "and they were sore afraid."

The words used to describe the shepherd's experience are from the Greek words "mega" meaning enormous and "phobos" - where we get 'phobia' from - a fear of something. What the shepherds felt was "mega fear!" I suppose the nearest we could get to that, today, would be to say they suffered get from "abject terror"

Here's the clue about the coming of the Light of God to the place and through the people in our scripture. When the shepherds were quaking in their boots and covering their eyes from the brightness of God's glory, the angel says, "Do not be afraid; for I am bringing you good news of great joy for ALL people."

It was 'ordinary folk' who first discovered that Jesus was born to bring the good news of God's love and grace. He brings hope, not condemnation - renewal, not retribution. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, not the Prince of Punishment. We are invited to rejoice in, and not hide from, the glory of heaven. And Jesus comes to the ordinary and for the ordinary.

And so, God approaches us in a much simpler form - a baby born in a stable to a homeless couple; shepherds and probably one or two animals...maybe even a donkey. This is how God brought this amazing and life-changing news.

We proclaim Jesus as: "Mighty Counsellor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace," and yet he becomes absolutely, totally, completely vulnerable!

The heart of the celebration we share at Christmas each year, is the truth that the God who came to us in the birth of Jesus is...

The God who is vulnerable!

The whole Christian message begins with...

- The unremarkable birth of someone who would become a most remarkable man.
- Parents who are poor.
- A mother in labour with no place to go.
- A newborn child with no crib for a bed.
- Visitors who come to see the child who have no influence in the world.

So as we remember the good tidings of great joy for all people truly are for all people. Not just the religious, not just the comfortable or respectable, not even just the honest and hard-working. And we remember that God comes to us in weakness and vulnerability. And that the vulnerability of the manger leads to the vulnerability of the cross.

Hymn 159:

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:  
Chorus  
Hark! the herald angels sing  
Glory to the new-born King.

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 us to dwell,  
Jesus, our Immanuel:  
Chorus

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 we no more may die,  
born to raise the things of earth,  
born to give us second birth:  
Chorus

Prayer:

God of life, God of new life,  
by the birth of Jesus  
you have brought light into our darkness.  
Shine in our lives.  
Christ Jesus, by your coming,  
**Set us free to follow and serve.**

God of life, God of new life,  
nothing will ever separate us from your love.  
Give us faith to trust your promise.  
Christ Jesus, by your coming,  
**Set us free to follow and serve.**

God of life, God of new life,  
you call us to serve the hungry, the poor,  
the lonely and the outcast.  
Show us how we can respond.  
Christ Jesus, by your coming,  
**Set us free to follow and serve.**

God of life, God of new life,  
Jesus was born into poverty

and lived under oppression.  
Open our eyes to injustice,  
and inspire us to proclaim your reign.  
Christ Jesus, by your coming,  
**Set us free to follow and serve.**

God of life, God of new life,  
by the birth of Jesus,  
bring your healing to those in need,  
especially those we name before you.

Christ Jesus, by your coming,  
**Set us free to follow and serve.**

God of life, God of new life,  
inspire this congregation  
to reach out beyond our walls,  
beyond our fears, beyond our past.  
Help us to welcome your future.  
Christ Jesus, by your coming,  
**Set us free to follow and serve.**

God of life, God of new life,  
by the birth of Jesus  
you have brought light into our darkness.  
Shine in our lives.  
Christ Jesus, by your coming,  
**Set us free to follow and serve.**

We pray in the name of Jesus,  
our light, our life, and our hope.

I invite you now to spend a few moments with your own prayer, in words or in silence; or simply in reflecting upon the stories we have read and the words we have heard in our worship today.

Hear our prayer, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 160:

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.

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

See how the shepherds,  
summoned to his cradle,  
leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;  
we too will thither  
bend our joyful footsteps:  
Chorus

Lo, star-led chieftains,  
magi, Christ adoring,  
offer him incense, gold and myrrh;  
we to the Christ-child  
bring our hearts' oblations:  
Chorus

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

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

Benediction

The child is born! Alleluia!  
Our God has come among us!  
Let the whole earth rejoice!  
Let us leave the manger and return to our daily routines,  
knowing that we have seen the Lord,  
and glorifying and praising God  
for all that we have heard and seen.

Alleluia! Our God is now here!  
Go forth, with full confidence and joy  
that you have seen the Messiah.

Alleluia! Our God is now here!  
Go forth to spread the Good News wherever you go,  
sharing God's love and promise with all whom you meet.  
Go into the world to find the lost,  
heal the broken,  
feed the hungry,  
release the prisoner,  
rebuild the nations,  
bring peace among people,  
and make music in every heart.

Alleluia! Our God is now here!  
In the name of our God,  
Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit,  
we cry out with the angels in the heavens  
and the shepherds in the fields:  
Alleluia! Our God is now here

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with each one of us, and with all those we love, today and for ever more.  
Amen

