

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 25 December 2020 Christmas Day

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for Christmas Day, 2020. A very happy Christmas to everyone!

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Jo and Tasha for their readings today.

Musicⁱ – *In dulci jubilo*,
arranged and played by Mike Oldfield
from the album *The Mike Oldfield Collection*

Lighting an Advent candle

On Christmas Day we light the Christ candle to celebrate.
A birthday candle to welcome the baby Jesus into the world.
May this candle flame inspire us each to put Christ at the centre of our day today.

Amen

John 1.14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Music: *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*
sung by The Sixteen & Harry Christophers
from their album *A Traditional Christmas Carol Collection, Vol. 2*

It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth,
to touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, goodwill to men,
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 blessed 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 man, at war with man, hears not
the love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
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 give back the song
which now the angels sing.

Prayers

A traditional prayer – a 'collect' for Christmas Day:

All praise to you, Almighty God and heavenly king, who sent your Son into the world to take our nature upon him and to be born of a pure virgin.

Grant that, as we are born again in him, so he may continually dwell in us and reign on earth as he reigns in heaven with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen

As Jesus taught us, so we pray:

The Lord's Prayer

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. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Luke tells of the birth of Jesus: Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

The shepherds go to the manger: Luke 2,8-16

And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, 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 of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ 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, and on earth peace to men 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.

Interlude: DIY Music

At this point in a Christmas Morning service we might share news of presents and plans for the day. Our Group has also been known to share in making music together. In the circumstances, the best that we have been able to come up with is a specially commissioned arrangement of *Silent Night* performed on tonic water bottle and handbells.

Music –

See, amid the winter's snow
 sung by the St. Michael's Singers and The Coventry Singers
 another goodie from their album
The Best Christmas Carols Album in the World... ever!

See, amid the winter's snow,
 born for us on Earth below,
 see, the tender Lamb appears,
 promised from eternal years.

*Hail, thou ever blessed morn!
 Hail redemption's happy dawn!
 Sing through all Jerusalem:
 Christ is born in Bethlehem.*

Lo, within a manger lies
 he who built the starry skies;
 he who, throned in height sublime,
 sits among the cherubim.

Say, ye holy shepherds, say,
 what your joyful news today;

wherefore have ye left your sheep
 on the lonely mountain steep?

"As we watched at dead of night,
 lo, we saw a wondrous light:
 angels singing 'Peace on Earth'
 told us of the Saviour's birth."

Sacred Infant, all divine,
 what a tender love was thine,
 thus to come from highest bliss
 down to such a world as this.

Teach, O teach us, Holy Child,
 by thy face so meek and mild,
 teach us to resemble thee,
 in thy sweet humility.

Scripture:

John unfolds the mystery of the Incarnation: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Reflection

This is my favourite Christmas reading. Any of us who have attended any conventional Christmas service of readings and carols will have heard it read – sometimes incomprehensibly but nevertheless read – at the end of the service. It is there because it falls outside the classic story-telling of Matthew and Luke. But also because it represents a climax. In some traditions everyone stands up for the reading of this particular passage. I

remember a minister at Rugby some years ago inviting people to do that, which didn't go down especially well with the Scottish ex-pats, or ex-Jocks or whatever we should call Presbyterians of the Scottish diaspora.

One way or another, always at Christmas. John 1.1-14.

But it is not Christmassy. It is the Gospel-writer choosing to start his account of the life of Christ with a manifesto that strives to state with all possible emphasis what his book is all about. It is about the Word of God who has always been present becoming human and visible and identifiable for a time.

I am always pleased when with their emphasis readers manage not to treat the opening words "in the beginning" as equivalent to "once upon a time". This is not John finding a new way of getting his audience to sit comfortably. It's an echo of the opening words of Genesis and with these words he is adding another layer to the disturbing detail of the description that is brought together so wonderfully in verse 14.

In the beginning was the Word. At Christmas we are not starting something. We are not finishing something. We are celebrating a point. A point on a continuum, on a journey that God has been on with his Creation since – the beginning. Our concept of God makes it difficult to think of a beginning. You can't define it the way you would refer to an event in our documented history. A large number with lots of nothings after it then the letters BC. The beginning. An unimaginable length of time ago. Before the big bang. Linford Christie the sprinter used to say that he tried to start running on the B of the Bang (as the gun was fired). God has been around since before the B of the Big.

This point we are celebrating is the point where God had to take... part of himself. His Son. The person – however we might define that – with whom God had shared his existence ... since the beginning.

We run out of words to describe the unmeasurable infinite being of God. But John the Gospel writer chose the word... The Word. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God.

And thirteen verses later after deploying more words to describe the Word we get to the most flabbergasting thing of them all, which gets me every time.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The angels and the shepherds and the wise men and the angels are all very well. But this is Christmas. The point when – amazing as it may seem – God could be seen walking around and heard telling those people how to put their relationship with him right.

It wasn't the start or the end of something. For God is. God is Alpha and Omega, in the Greek alphabet the source and the ending. But the truth is that he never had a start. And like his love, he will never end.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God, this year, as Christmas has become a cause for worry as well as for celebration, a time of being careful rather than completely joyful, help us to focus for a moment on you.

We thank you once again for the gift of your Son.

We thank you once again for his coming among us. To be one of us. To show us how human love can be an authentic echo of your own love.

In our nation, in our churches, in our families and with our hearts may we adopt his message and act towards others as we ought.

We thank you for key workers who look after us. We thank you for health service staff in all roles. We thank you for those who have worked to keep schools and other places of education accessible and effective. We thank you for those involved in supplying our needs of food, for distribution chains. For all whom we rely upon we pray for safety this Christmas.

We pray patience and a swift release onto their homeward journeys for those caught up in queues in Kent. Deliverance for those who deliver.

And for ourselves and those we love we ask for grace to take Christmas into our hearts, which already seem so full of stress and anxiety, worry, sadness and frustration with these abnormal times.

You are with us, Lord. Help us to know it.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

Music: *Hark! The Herald angels sing*
 sung by Trinity College Choir, Cambridge & Richard Marlow
 from the album, *The Great British Carol Collection*

Hark! The herald-angels sing
"glory to the newborn 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".

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 man to dwell;
Jesus, our Emmanuel.

Hark! The herald-angels sing
"glory to the newborn King".

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".

Blessing

Go in peace to serve the Lord. May Christ be born in our hearts and dwell among us.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all this Christmas Day and for ever. Amen

Here is the final movement from Hely-Hutchinson's *Carol Symphony*. It lasts around five minutes and is worth a listen, even if you have to wait a minute for a carol tune to emerge!

Music: *A Carol Symphony: IV. Allegro energico come prima*
by Victor Hely-Hutchinson performed by
Gavin Sutherland and The City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra

Thank you for listening to our podcast.

The last in this series will be uploaded on Boxing Day and relates to Sunday 27 December.

The archive on our website will remain available until Easter, and after that depending on licensing conditions.

Credits

In dulci jubilo was arranged and played by Mike Oldfield, from the album *The Mike Oldfield Collection*.

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear was sung by The Sixteen & Harry Christophers from their album *A Traditional Christmas Carol Collection, Vol. 2*

Silent night, arranged for tonic water bottle and handbells by Bill Young, was performed by Bill Young on tonic water bottle and Bill Young and Erica Young on handbells, taken from their forthcoming and as yet unnamed album.

See, amid the winter's snow arranged by Paul Leddington-Wright was sung by the St. Michael's Singers and The Coventry Singers; another goodie from their album *The Best Christmas Carols Album in the World... ever!*

Hark! The Herald angels sing was sung by Trinity College Choir, Cambridge and Richard Marlow from the album, *The Great British Carol Collection*

A Carol Symphony: IV. Allegro energico come prima by Victor Hely-Hutchinson was performed by Gavin Sutherland and The City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra

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ⁱⁱ Bible passages are taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition.