

Midnight Communion on Christmas Eve

December 24th 2020

***Midnight's Child***

Welcome

A warm welcome to our service of midnight communion for 2020. Please have some bread and wine or juice ready.

Call to Worship

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15)

We worship our Lord Jesus, a Saviour whose grace and majesty may not be adequately captured in words by singing first of all, *O little town of Bethlehem*.

Carol **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 streets 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 to men on earth;  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight.

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

How silently, how silently,  
The wondrous gift is giv'n!  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heav'n.  
No ear may hear His coming;  
But in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive him, still  
The dear Christ enters in.

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.

#### Opening prayer

At this time of pandemic, come and shine in our own dark streets dear Lord.  
As this time of change for our nations' relationships with the world at large, meet us  
in our hopes and fears.  
As children try to sleep, as some remember loved ones who have died, as many  
face a lonelier Christmas than usual, O come to us, abide with us, our Lord  
Emmanuel.

As individuals may face particular challenges unknown to those around them, and as we contemplate our particular Christmas this year we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. Amen.

Let's hear the majestic words of the prologue to John's gospel as the evangelist unfolds the mystery of the incarnation.

### Reading

John 1: 1 - 18

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 all humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone 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 did receive 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 Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, 'This is the one I spoke about when I said, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."') Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Prayers of Intercession Linda Wallace

Lord, we scan the horizon and search for signs of life.

But nothing moves —

The cool, crisp air freezes our breath and we know we are alone.

But it is an aloneness that speaks of space to think, to reflect - the freedom just to be. And we are overwhelmed by it.

Lord, we have come into your presence and it makes us want to hold our breath; to remain utterly still and simply enjoy the freedom that comes as we step out of our world and, for a brief moment, we are overwhelmed by the knowledge that the King of kings, the Lord of time and eternity, the sovereign of all things is here — with us.

Lord, we have no words to express just how we feel. We have come to adore you and will do so now and for all eternity. Amen.

I chose to open with this piece because this is how it has sometimes been during this extraordinary time, when we have had to step out of our busyness for a while and in some very special moments, watching the natural world continue as normal, we have been made so very aware of our fragility and our dependence on our creator God, our Father and our Lord.

So I ask you to focus on him now as we bring our prayers of intercession, and lift our prayers and petitions before his throne.

Think of someone who will be on their own this Christmas. They may be widows or widowers, they may have physical or mental health problems, they may have recently lost a loved one as a result of the Covid virus, or they have someone close in hospital right now. Whatever, the reasons or circumstances, we ask for God's peace to be upon them.

We lift to you, Father, all those who have lost, or may lose their jobs and who will be facing an uncertain Christmas, and who are worrying about the possibility of being

without employment and the terrifying prospect of losing their home in the new year.

Father, we think of those around the world who's Christmas will be filled with hatred and war. For those who have been displaced and are living in refugee camps, uncertain if they will find a place where they will be accepted and offered friendship and a helping hand to try and build a new future for themselves and their families. We think of those who will be sleeping rough through the winter months, for those who are dependent on drugs and alcohol and who many regard as social pariahs and misfits.

Lord, there are children everywhere who will never know the security and joy of a loving home, with parents who they can depend on. Many are neglected and abused and their only respite comes from being at school. We know that during times of school closure, even that lifeline is taken away, leaving them vulnerable and in many cases hungry and afraid.

In a time of silence, think of those we have been asked to remember and bring your own requests to God.

Father, all these people are loved and cherished by you. Hold them in your loving care and shelter them in the shadow of your mighty wings. Bring hope and healing in the way only you can do and let your light shine in the darkness that they inhabit right now. For Jesus' sake we ask it.

We bring to you all those on our prayer chain and all we know who are ill or hurting or bereaved. All we know who are experiencing mental anguish and worry and those we love who are hurting. May they all sense your very real presence with them in their suffering and may they know your peace and healing touch upon their bodies and minds.

Lord, we are saddened that we cannot all be together, especially at this most joyous season, but we are as one in love and unity, as a part of the family of God, and we ask your blessings upon the members of the church at Hearsall and the global church family. We pray that it will not be too long until we can all safely be together

again.

Father, we are amazed by your grace and understanding. We are overwhelmed by your care and concern. We are moved by the joy you have in us and we long to worship you in a way that is worthy of you. We praise you for the way you speak to us through your word and for the gracious way you listen to our prayers and to our cries for help and hope.

At this most special time of the year, we thank you once again for Jesus Christ, our Lord, coming into the world of humanity. We praise you, Lord, for the way that Christ made himself as if he were nothing. He, who was divine from the beginning, emptied himself of the glory that was his by right. We praise you that he added to his divine nature all that it means to be a human being. We praise you more that he did it for us, that we might become the people you always intended us to be. May your holy spirit so flood our hearts and lives that we may glorify Christ as our Saviour and give honour to him as our Lord.

For his name's sake. Amen.

Let's hear the Pritchard family sing a Christmas song for us tonight: Gaudete!

### Carol **Gaudete**

*Chorus*

*Gaudete, Gaudete! Christus est natus*

*Ex Maria Virgine, Gaudete!*

*Gaudete, Gaudete! Christus est natus*

*Ex Maria Virgine, Gaudete!*

*Translation:*

*Rejoice, Rejoice! Christ is born*

*Of the virgin Mary, Rejoice!*

*Rejoice, Rejoice! Christ is born*

*Of the virgin Mary, Rejoice!*

1. Hear ye one and hear ye all,

Each and every nation.

On this night is born a king

Blessing of creation.

*Chorus*

2. Shepherds follow one bright star,  
Prince of peace proclaiming.  
Come to worship and adore  
Love that's never changing.

*Chorus*

*Gaudete, Gaudete! Christus est natus  
Ex Maria Virgine, Gaudete!  
Gaudete, Gaudete! Christus est natus  
Ex Maria Virgine, Gaudete!*

3. Come and see the baby boy,  
In a manger lying.  
Choirs of angels sing with joy.  
With one voice uniting.

*Chorus*

4. Prophet's tale is now fulfilled  
For all generations.  
Love's pure light is with us still,  
God's blessed creation.

*Chorus*

Talk

### ***Midnight's Child***

Why do we have a tradition of midnight communion anyway?

Midnight is when Cinderella's coach turns back into a pumpkin. It's marked by the longest countdown of every day with twelve clangs of Big Ben. We think of the final seconds of New Year's Eve and the prelude to a fresh start. A clean slate. Potential.

At midnight on the 15th August 1947, India gained her independence. Salman Rushdie's wonderful novel *Midnight's Children* suggests that babies born in that midnight hour were imbued with some special power.

Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library* shows the protagonist held between life and death. She enters a strange library at midnight in some mystical psychic space and its books represent versions of her life she might have lived had she made different choices.

Midnight is the moment of magic, of choice, of potential.

Of course we have little idea when Jesus was born and somewhat arbitrarily we allocate 25th December as his feast day. And so as Christmas Eve draws to its close, we absorb archetypal feelings about midnight and see the birth of the Saviour in this midnight light.

Midnight is a moment between days. It feels like a magical doorway from an old reality into a new one. In a small way, through our rhythm of sleep and waking, we go through that doorway once every twenty four hours. We might sleep on some issue, and often the morning brings a fresh perspective and even creative solutions to problems which seemed intractable the previous day.

And we feel that more intensely at midnight on Christmas Eve. It's a liminal moment in our year. It's a time when it is easier to believe that we can live in the reality of the incarnation.

So, right now, we pass through the Christmas doorway again.

And what do we see? Our doorway leads into... a stable - or at any rate a place where animals are housed and where a mother gives birth to a baby boy. It's a door into a world populated by cattle, shepherds, angels, and later Magi.

We hold our breath, feeling the unparalleled wonder of that first Christmas moment. What do you see? A starlit Bethlehem? A new mother's face blending exhaustion

and delight? A shepherd bursting in with a tale of angels on the hillside? A tiny baby boy set to rest in a cow's feeding trough? What do you hear? Gasps of wonder? A baby's gentle breathing? The bray of a donkey? And what do you smell? Earthy smells of dung, sweat... and breastmilk?

And let's savour this midnight moment. Into this unhygienic, imperfect world of crazy kings, poor shepherds, inconvenient edicts and occupying imperial armies... into this world comes the Christ.

For a second, a minute, an hour, a day perhaps, we pause. We think of other magical Christmas moments. Of children waking before dawn and reaching for the stocking at the end of the bed. Of brightly-dressed Christmas trees. Of families gathering around a heaving Christmas table. We think of friends, of joy, of gifts, of love, of hope.

All these wonders are secondary to this Bethlehem wonder. All the other wonders echo the marvellous mystery of the Word Made flesh, God slipping into the world as a vulnerable baby. The eye of a baby gazing on a faraway star is the eye of the Creator surveying his creation from the inside.

But what's this? The familiar Christmas tableau itself is not our destination, but our door, our midnight moment. The stable is the door. We pass through this charming festive tableau back into our 21st century reality. And God is with us, just as we are now.

I don't know what's going through your mind. I don't know what you are feeling in your body. But God is **here**. We feel it in our gut. God is in our breathing and in our loving. Brexit, pandemic, climate change notwithstanding, God is here. God saw the world through eyes like yours. God heard it through ears like yours. God smelt the world through a nose like yours. God breathed its air into lungs like yours.

Midnight is that magical moment of potential and hope. But this is not a moment of formal education. This is not a sermon with three incarnation action points. This is a

moment to feel. To trust that, having been here tonight, Christ continues to experience the world through our own humble bodies.

And so passing through this door of midnight possibility, through this door of a stable, we re-enter our world and everything is the same and everything is different. For Midnight's Child has transformed our hearts.

I wonder what the next 24 hours holds for you? Christmas dinner in a garden? A lunch alone? Only a small proportion of the people we might normally see?

We experience whatever we experience sensing that Christ is with us. And we are open to be his hands, his feet, his heart, to show the solid reality of his loving care to all we may have contact with, whether near or far.

Let's be still now for a few moments as we listen to John playing on the organ, *Wait for the Lord*.

### Organ recitation **Wait for the Lord**

Let's pray together.

### Prayers

Holy Lord, One God in Three Persons, at this Christmas hour we adore your holy name and wonder at the great mysteries of creation, salvation and eternity. How we thank you that you did not leave us in loneliness but drew close, entering our world as the Word Made flesh and humbly bearing the nature of a tiny baby, dependent and vulnerable. Through his life, death and resurrection you won our salvation and you call us to our eternal home. We bless you, O Lord.

And now we pray for our world.

Where there is warfare, we pray for peace.

Where there is sickness, we pray for healing.

Where there is sadness, we pray for comfort.

Where there is poverty, we pray for justice.

Where there is hatred, we pray for love.

And we, your children, offer ourselves as agents of peace, healing, comfort, justice and love, this Christmas time and in the year that awaits us.

In a moment of silence we bring specific prayers for particular people to our Lord.

We pray in Jesus' name

Amen.

### Carol **Silent Night**

Silent night, holy night,  
All is calm, all is bright;  
'Round yon virgin mother and Child.  
Holy Infant so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace,  
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,  
Shepherds quake at the sight:  
Glories stream from heaven afar,  
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia:  
Christ the Saviour is born,  
Christ the Saviour is born!

Silent night, holy night,  
Son of God, love's pure light;  
Radiance beams from Thy holy face,  
With the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth,  
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.

## Communion

### Invitation

If you are open to kindness,  
If you are looking for healing,  
If you are in need of forgiveness,  
If you are wanting fellowship,  
Come to Christ's table.  
Come and receive Christ in the humble home of your own heart.

### Confession

Lord, we belong to a race who have been careless of the environment, forgetful of the needy, open to violence and greedy for selfish gain. We acknowledge our own part in these evils, and pray for your forgiveness for ourselves and for all people. For the sake of your kingdom. Amen.

### The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come, your will be done,  
on earth as it is 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.

### Thanksgiving

Lord God, you created the universe at the beginning of time and made our planet a place of living abundance and beautiful variety. Your likeness lies in our souls, and we have been born into a world of wonder and joy. At Christmas time the songs of the angels echo down the centuries to our own, and like the shepherds of old we hear heavenly choirs and hurry to the stable. What joy we feel as we gaze at the infant Christ, the Word made flesh, and how our hearts tremble to know that thirty-odd years later this Christ would suffer and die to bring us salvation from all that is sinful and false, mean and hard-hearted. But on the third day he rose again and now

he meets us again as we share both bread and wine, tokens of his body broken, his blood shed and his invitation to the feast of glory. For all these gifts and these blessings, we thank you, in the excellent name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

#### Words of Institution (Mark 14)

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me – one who is eating with me.'

They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, 'Surely you don't mean me?'

'It is one of the Twelve,' he replied, 'one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.'

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take it; this is my body.'

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.

'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,' he said to them. 'Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

#### Sharing communion and Song

As we listen to our next song I invite you to take the bread and the wine, to eat and to drink and to share, remembering Christ, and communing with him and with all people of faith.

#### **Thorns in the Straw**

Verse 1

Since the day the angel came,  
It seemed that everything had changed;  
The only certain thing

Was the child that moved within,  
On the road that would not end,  
Winding down to Bethlehem,  
So far away from home.

#### Verse 2

Just a blanket on the floor  
Of a vacant cattle-stall,  
But there the child was born.  
She held Him in her arms,  
And as she laid Him down to sleep,  
She wondered - will it always be  
So bitter and so sweet?

#### *Chorus 1*

*And did she see there  
In the straw by His head a thorn?  
And did she smell myrrh  
In the air on that starry night?*

#### Verse 3

Then the words of ancient seers  
Tumbled down the centuries;  
A virgin shall conceive  
God with us, prince of Peace,  
Man of Sorrows - strangest name.  
Oh Joseph, there it comes again,  
So bitter yet so sweet.

#### *Chorus 2*

*And did she see there  
In the straw by His head a thorn?  
And did she smell myrrh  
In the air on that starry night?  
And did she hear angels sing*

*Not so far away,  
Till at last the sun  
Rose blood-red  
In the morning sky?*

Verse 4

And as she watched Him through the years,  
Her joy was mingled with her tears,  
And she'd feel it all again,  
The glory and the shame,  
And when the miracles began,  
She wondered who is this man,  
And where will this all end?

Verse 5

'Til against a darkening sky,  
The Son she loved was lifted high,  
And with His dying breath,  
She heard Him say, 'Father forgive',  
And to the criminal beside,  
'Today - with me in Paradise,'  
So bitter yet so sweet.

*Chorus 2*

Post-communion prayer

Thank you heavenly Father for feeding us with the body and blood of your dear Son Jesus, our Saviour and our Lord. The salvation we experience is glorious beyond all words and we ask that the joy and wonder of communing with him this night may transform us into people of peace, joy and love this Christmas time and always.  
Amen,

Let us sing together the great Carol, *O Come all ye faithful*.

**Carol O Come all ye faithful**

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:

*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:

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*Christ the Lord!*

See how the shepherd,

Summoned to his cradle,

Leaving their flocks, draw nigh with lowly fear;

We too will thither

Bend our joyful footsteps:

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*Christ the Lord!*

Lo! Star-led chieftains,

Magi, Christ adoring,

Offer him incense, gold, and myrrh;

We to the Christ Child

Bring our hearts' oblations:

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*Christ the Lord!*

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,

Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!

Glory to God

In the highest:

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*Christ the Lord!*

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning,

Jesu, to Thee be glory given;

Word of the Father,

Now in flesh appearing:

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*O come, let us adore Him,*

*Christ the Lord!*

### Blessing

And now may the blessing of our loving Lord,

Who made us in delight,

Became one of us in grace,

And who holds us in joy,

Live in our hearts this Christmas morning and for evermore... Amen.

It's been so special to be with you for this Christmas Eve communion. I wish you all a very happy Christmas and I leave you with the new carol that Martin and I composed, *Revere the Secret Darkness...*

## ***Revere the Secret Darkness***

Revere the secret darkness of the womb  
where life is nurtured in a sacred space  
then birthed into the shadowed world to show  
that glory lingers on a new born face:  
enraptured, how a mother's eyes display  
that love is at the heart of heaven's way.  
The gentle power of love is hard to prove  
when souls are masked and bodies stand apart,  
but God accepts the risk of drawing close  
and heaven's life beats with a human heart.  
As mother Mary feeds a baby boy  
the world is tinged with everlasting joy.

For Jesus showed us what we may become  
and demonstrated how we can be true  
to love's demands in all of human life  
by building peace in everything we do.  
The frailty of a humble human frame  
can overflow with life in Jesus' name.

And when we wander from the path of love  
or suffer in the darkest vale of death  
in tenderness and mercy he draws close  
and intimates his grace with every breath.  
The King of kings resided with the poor  
to open heaven's goodness to us all.

At Christmas time, our hearts aglow with love,  
into our world we welcome Christ again;  
our world of internet and climate change  
of viruses, dissent and racist hate.  
We offer up our feet, our hands, our hearts  
embodying the love that Jesus starts.