

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> December 2021

*All material © Heather Whyte unless stated otherwise*

God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us,  
though separate let us worship together in God.

In the birth of a child we see the fullness of God's love, discover the mystery that is God and know the oneness that is our hope.

Matthew 1:18-23

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah<sup>[j]</sup> took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'

We light this candle for every child born, for every expression of God with us, and for the hope of new life. In the mystery of this story is the depth of God and depth of love, and it reveals the complexity of creation within the simplicity trust. Through our words and actions may we reveal God to the world and be the light of love in the world.

|                             |                                   |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Sing together               | In the darkness comes a light,    |
| Tune St Bees                | light of love for all to see.     |
| Listen <a href="#">here</a> | With this light within our hearts |
|                             | we can sense the power of peace.  |

**Suggested hymn** Once in Royal David's City

Listen [here](#)

### Prayer

Eternal God, source of all being, we come to worship you and to bring our thanksgiving for the wonder of the Christmas story. As we have celebrated, remembering the birth of Jesus, anticipating the message of love that this child would bring to the world and the challenge to live simply and generously, we think of all the gifts with which we are surrounded and give thanks.

We thank you for the gifts of creation, the variety that surrounds us and the beauty of plants and trees. As we look out on our gardens, we see the effects of winter, but we also see the first hints of new life, small shoots of green appearing through damp and sometimes hard soil and we remember that even though the world is looking ravaged by Covid and the effects of Climate change there are shoots of hope, for you are always creating and your love holds us even in the darkest of times. We thank you for your presence with us.

We thank you for the gifts of family and friends, good neighbours, and the unexpected help of strangers. We are all one in your love and we pray that we may celebrate that oneness through generosity in our words and actions.

At the end of another strange year the reason for our celebration remains the same, the birth of a child who would change the way we see the world, see ourselves and understand you. We thank you for the gift of this child.

As we worship together and yet apart, we are united in the words that Jesus taught the disciples and we say together,

Our Father....

### **Introduction**

As we remember the story behind our Christmas celebration, we also remember the life and ministry of Jesus which is behind our fellowship together as church. This morning we will reflect on the bigger picture of Christmas by focusing on three points in the life of Jesus.

**Reading** Luke 2:1-20

**Reflection** One midnight

Creation moves with a rhythm, a cycle, and the earth circles the sun, gently rotating itself so that every place on earth experiences the turn of the day, sometimes in light but mostly in darkness. We call it midnight.

Mostly the world sleeps at midnight, but around the globe there are those who work at midnight, carers and cleaners, deliverers and keepers. As Bethlehem slept, the hills around, if not bustling were gently humming with life, sheep bleated, dogs snuffled and barked and shepherds huddled around the fire shared jokes and stories until the hour overcame them, the fire became embers and voices were silenced in the peace of the night.

In the town as midnight gently arrived, things settled also. Dogs snuffled, innkeepers bolted doors, a child wakened and was soothed back to sleep, a last visitor left and made their way back home and candles were extinguished as darkness brought the peace of night. Into the darkness came the cry of a baby, few heard it, and nobody was surprised by it although they may have been surprised that it came from a stable had they known.

On the hills above the town they didn't hear the cry as they dozed in the low light from the fire, but they did hear the voice, and they witnessed the piercing light, 'Do not be afraid'. Not much frightened shepherds but that voice, the light and the words shocked them awake and when their wits caught up, they were afraid. They had never experienced anything like this before. The voice came again, 'Do not be afraid, I have great news, a child has been born, a boy who will change the world and Bethlehem is his birthplace. You will find the child in a stable, amidst the animals where his mother has laid him in the feeding trough to keep him warm.'

Confusion caught up with fear and the shepherds stood stock still as more lights and more voices erupted in the night sky, as if all heaven had descended in an explosion of fireworks across the sky, as a celebration of eternity marked the moment. Then as suddenly as it came it was over, and the shepherds looked at one another for reassurance that they had all seen and heard the same thing. Then, as if heaven drove their feet, they found themselves racing towards Bethlehem, sheep following.

Into the silent town they erupted and whilst few had heard the baby many were to hear the shepherds as they banged on doors searching for the child. Then suddenly they were there, standing in the doorway of a stable and gazing at a child wrapped tightly against the cold night air and nestled in a bed of straw. Silence. Then the moments after midnight were filled with celebration and sheep bleating in the town, as the shepherds headed back to their fields. They did not understand what had happened and it would be some time before they understood, maybe thirty years, but they knew it was special and it would echo around their campfires in the nights that followed and be shared with partners and children in the years to come.

One midnight, the night that eternity broke into the world, and everything changed.

Suggested Hymn 144 It came upon the midnight clear

Listen [here](#)

**Reading** John 3:1-21

**Reflection** At midnight

In the still of the night everything seems louder, a baby's cries seem to shatter the silence, a dog barks as a cat mews and the scuffles of a chase ensue. Undercover of the night strange things happen, doors open and close and figures hug the shadows to keep hidden.

He was restless that night, thoughts churning round in his head and his mind battling with his heart. His heart had stirred with the message of the prophet, but his head, and his position, told him to repel the stirrings. Unable to settle he stole from his house into the darkness of midnight and found himself at the door of the prophet. Seemingly unsurprised, the prophet invited him in.

In the still of the night they spoke, or the prophet spoke, and he questioned. If he had thought it would make things easier, he was to be disappointed, it felt like riddles racing around in his head, ideas bouncing off each other, and chaos erupting in his mind. He was sure the prophet said he must be born again but how was that even possible? What did babies and nappies have to do with God?

Seeing his confusion, the prophet placed a hand on his shoulder and with gentleness and patience began again. 'The world is in darkness, people care only for themselves, they have forgotten their connection to one another and God. It needn't be like this. Many years ago, a light entered the world, the light of God's love shining in the dark of the night. It was midnight then also. I have seen that light; I am that light, but it is a light that is seen by the heart because our minds block out the light for fear of change. To open our eyes, we need to allow our hearts to be opened, our hearts to be awakened to the light within, we need a new start, a new beginning. Only this will repel the darkness.'

Once again hugging the shadows Nicodemus returns home, his mind still full of thoughts but now also full of hope. In the quiet of midnight, a seed was planted. He was not sure what the flower would look like, but he knew he wanted it to grow, he wanted to live in the light.

One midnight, the night the light of hope flickered then shone and his world changed.

**Suggested Hymn** 161 Good Christians all rejoice

Listen [here](#)

**Reading** Luke 22:39-46

**Reflection** Last midnight

It is midnight and darkness surrounds the garden, a thin moon casts shadows, and bushes become prey as he settles to pray. It is thirty-three years since his birth, thirty-three years since that other midnight when angels sang, and shepherds watched in wonder. It is three years from that other midnight when a confused man followed his heart and allowed hope to shine in the darkness. Three years and here he is surrounded by the darkness and as he prays, he is the prey,

No shepherds tonight, his followers lie sleeping, unaware, he is alone with his thoughts. In his heart he knew, knew the danger, the establishment don't welcome prophets of change, don't want their systems challenged and overturned, even if it will bring peace. He wonders briefly if the angels knew, it did not have to be like this, it is choices that have charted the path to this moment, choices and responses.

There is still a choice, he could run, hide, escape, let the darkness take him but he knows he won't, for his heart is filled with love for the world. There is one more thing to do, and he prays for courage, and for those who will complete the task that must happen. In the silence he hears them approach, their torches dispelling the shadows of the night and creating more. He breathes deeply and rises to meet them, the light of love still present and nothing can extinguish it.

One midnight, when the darkness threatens but the light still flickers in the gloom and will shine more brightly as a new day dawns and hope of eternity replaces fear.

**Suggested hymn**      Hark the herald angels sing  
Listen [here](#)

### **Reflection**

The birth of Jesus is often referred to as the incarnation, the coming of God into the world but that is at odds with an understanding of God everywhere and yet there is something special about the birth of a child. It is a moment of potential.

We might consider the planet as the body which births humanity, we could say that the planet is the womb of God. We are all born of creation, and if we believe God to be everywhere and in everything then God is in creation and so God is in us, and as a part of creation we are also a part of God. Each human is born with the full potential of God within, but events and circumstances, choices and decisions, will affect the realisation of that potential.

Our understanding of incarnation as a Christian concept has changed dramatically since the mid twentieth century. Once associated with the coming of Jesus to rescue and redeem humanity, the story of the incarnation described the unique way that the historical Jesus was born, grew up, ministered and was crucified, it also encompassed the stories of the resurrection. It was a very anthropocentric view in which humanity alone was rescued.

Since the mid twentieth century this view has become more and more problematic. Why only humans? Why only the soul of the human? Attention has moved to a more holistic view of both our humanity and creation, and incarnation has become associated with embodiment understood from three different perspectives.

From Aristotle to Freud, philosophy concentrated on the separation of an infant from the maternal womb to realise an autonomous individualised identity. We have since recognised that our foundational pattern is one of relationship, and that a perspective of interdependence rather than independence is healthier. We have moved from analytical to contextual, to an understanding that circumstances matter in how we comprehend events and actions. The body is a relational expression of cosmic energy; thus incarnation is relational and not in isolation.

One drawback of our patriarchal past is a false perspective of male superiority which has resulted in the suppression, with Christian history, of anything remotely connected to female reproduction. Yet, in John 3 we read of Jesus talking of re-birth, something distinctly associated with female reproduction. We also read of the way in which Jesus encouraged male and female followers, and we think of the story of Mary and Martha where Mary takes her place at the feet of the Rabbi, alongside men. We have moved in our understanding, recognising wholeness as being a whole-body experience, and that the body as part of creation and therefore part of God and thus glorious. Incarnation, as relational, embraces a sensual understanding of life.

As quantum science has opened up new understandings, we have moved from a planet based to a cosmic based perspective, in which all matter is held in form by relational bonds and recognised that to grow and flourish we need to understand ourselves in a new way. We are a part of creation, which is everything we know and more. Creation is the whole of God and so we need to explore the spiritual nature of the world within the greater creation, to begin to understand the breadth of spiritual knowledge contained with creation, within ourselves. If we are to understand incarnation as of God, then we must accept we are all an expression of incarnation.

Today, Jesus is viewed as an exemplary embodiment of the incarnation process, a supreme articulation of God within humanity. When we can understand ourselves as an incarnation then a personal relationship with God unfolds in conjunction with an inner knowledge of oneness. In this oneness, which we read Jesus is referring to many times in the gospels, we are encouraged to love one another and to love God, but we cannot do this unless we love creation. The primary Christian response to an incarnational existence becomes justice, we seek to establish right relationships in order to restore unity and peace which are the natural state of creation, embodied in an

understanding of kingdom. The message of Jesus is one of the wholeness of creation, the all-encompassing love that is God, which is forgiving, gracious and empowering, contrasts with the unforgiving, intolerant and self-serving reality of the world which we allow to exist.

Christmas is a celebration of God's embodiment within all creation, in all forms and expressions, all life and no life, for God is. Our response to Christmas should be to explore more deeply our relationship with God, creation and each other, and to learn to love, as Jesus loved, by embracing oneness and living justice.

Today is St Stephen's day, so as we reflect on the call to justice let us sing the carol of St Stephen.

**Suggested hymn**      Good King Wenceslas  
listen [here](#)

### **Prayers**

Loving God as we remember the message of Jesus, we lift to you the world in which we live. It is a world full of pain and strife, a world of barriers and divisions in which love often seems overwhelmed by fear and intolerance. You call us to love one another, to set aside differences and learn to live as on.

#### **Incarnational God may our understanding grow, and justice flow as we learn to love.**

We pray for the people of countries where power and control put lives at risk, where governments create unease and suspicion and injustice fosters resentment and creates need. We pray for people in countries where health care is scarce and a lack of technology creates disease, where children die of hunger or become orphans, abandoned to living on the streets. Loving God, you offer a solution.

#### **Incarnational God may our understanding grow, and justice flow as we learn to love.**

As we continue to struggle with the effects of the pandemic, we pray remember those who have lost loved ones, suffered life changing responses to the virus, have experienced isolation and loneliness, unemployment, or anxiety and mental illness as a result of the pandemic. We pray for a just sharing of discoveries which limit the effects of the virus, and a generous sharing of vaccines to enable the world to live safely with the virus. We have seen love in action in the kindness of strangers and dedication of workers and we give thanks, but you call us to make a difference, and we pray for the inspiration to find creative solutions to the problems created by Covid 19 within our communities and around the world.

#### **Incarnational God may our understanding grow, and justice flow as we learn to love.**

We pray for people who find themselves refugees, fleeing danger and difficult situations As we remember the story of Jesus may we recognise the fear and anxiety of refugees in our own country and offer a generous and loving welcome into our communities. May our response to Christmas be a new passion for justice, may we use our voice of love to challenge systems that are prejudiced and encourage intolerance. May the message of Jesus and the story of Christmas inspire us to work for oneness and reach out to those whose lives are so different from our own.

#### **Incarnational God may our understanding grow, and justice flow as we learn to love.**

Loving God as we look to the future may we hold on to the vision of hope that is the message of Jesus. The world may feel strange and we are frustrated by the changes that we have had to make to our way of living but may we remember that everyday there are people who face greater challenges and whose lives are limited by their circumstances. We pray for our families and friends, for neighbours and strangers with whom we are one in your love. As we celebrate together may our shared stories blend into a love song of the kingdom and herald, like the angels, and new way of being. Amen.

### **Our offering to God.**

As we worship together, we pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church through our continued offering and by exploring new ways of living generously and sharing the message of hope that is God's love. Amen

**Suggested hymn**      Tune puer nobis – listen [here](#)

At this time a child was born  
one with all creation,  
filled with love and hope and peace  
his message - build connection.

Angels heralded his birth,  
kings and shepherds followed,  
guided by a star so bright  
it seemed like heaven hallowed.

Heather Whyte 2019

Through the years his message rang,  
challenging and showing,  
live in love and share with all,  
the grace of God bestowing.

One with God and one with all,  
loving with compassion,  
following the way of Christ  
we live to be communion.

**Blessing**

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.