

Christmas Day – Year B

25 December 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank our contributors for their suggestions for lectionary-based worship for Christmas Day.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Christmas Day – Nativity of the Lord (II)

Prepared by Sia Van den Breemt, Reader at St Andrew's Brussels Church of Scotland.
Lectionary readings: Isaiah 62:6-12 • Psalm 97 • Titus 3:4-7 • Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20

Introduction

Saint Andrew's Brussels is probably quite different from churches in Scotland because the Scots in the congregation are completely outnumbered by members of different backgrounds and traditions. This means that many members are away in their home countries at Christmas. For this reason, we tend to emphasise the traditional services in December – the Sunday School Nativity play and the Nine Lessons and Carols service – so that we can celebrate Christmas with regular members before they go away. And since the Covid-19 pandemic we have created new traditions, such as an online Watchnight service. Last year we put this together as a team and this is something we would like to continue, as we found the sharing of ideas and styles very fruitful.

The absence of a number of members and the online worship certainly don't mean that the church is empty on Christmas Day – the spaces in the pews are filled by visitors and people living in Brussels who don't make it to church every Sunday, so the church is usually packed.

Unless I am particularly inspired to preach on something else, I always take a look at the lectionary readings. One or two normally stand out, but I quite often use one of the readings and complement it with a passage that is not in the lectionary if it seems to fit.

For the Christmas services, the stories of Jesus' birth are obviously centre stage. After all, people who have come especially for Christmas would be a little disappointed not to hear the traditional story. This, in itself, could be problematic: I wonder if the very familiarity of the stories of Jesus' birth mean that it is hard to see beyond the well-known words that we can almost quote by heart and once again be awestruck about what is happening in those stories. My involvement with the Sunday School and Nativity play does help with this because the children's excitement is infectious. And as one would with the children, I read the text out loud, as if I were a story-teller, telling the story for the first time. I usually find it helpful to shine a fresh light on the text and it causes me to think of the different characters in the story and how they might have lived this incredible event without our 20/20 hindsight.

I find that picking out one sentence or character that we often skip over without noticing can help me to rediscover my sense of wonder. This is also where the second text, Psalm 97, comes in (see exegesis section).

Then my jumbled ideas and questions are typed into the internet search engine, an exercise, I realise, that should be carried out with caution, but which often brings up some interesting ideas ... as well as some that are completely off the wall.

At this stage we (our Minister and other Readers and OLMs in training in the International Presbytery) have got into the habit of getting together for a brainstorming session on the texts for our upcoming sermons. We already have an idea of what we want to say but I find it so useful to hear another point of view that often gets me over the rough patches in my text. This time I had input from OLM candidate David Lloyd, our Presbytery Worship and Prayer Coordinator, Rev Irene Bom, and Eric Foggitt, our Minister.

Unsurprisingly, given what I said above, Luke's account of the birth would be my main text. The account in Luke includes the difficulties of the incarnation – the journey, the lack of comfort or welcome, and the choice of shepherds (who, with their nomadic lives were seen as untrustworthy) rather than Kings/magi as the first witnesses (after the barn animals of course!). This fits with Luke's interest in the poor and the marginalised. He makes it clear that Jesus came for the lowly and humble.

In past years, my main characters were the shepherds, another year Mary or, more specifically, her visitors' book, as we looked at the faith and trust she must have had with the strange stream of visitors she welcomed at this time, apart from giving birth to the Messiah in a stable!

With such a well-known passage, I make a particular effort to try to imagine how it would have sounded at the time. For example, how did Mary feel, receiving this motley crew of visitors, lowly and smelly, or kingly and bearing expensive gifts? Of course it is important to think of the symbolism of these contrasting guests.

Having read it word by word, the questions on the text that come to mind are, "Why did Mary and Joseph end up in the stable?" "Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem?" "What role did my character play and how did it affect the story?" I always feel that this work is my best prayer time. These questions create a dialogue with God and God often leads me in an unexpected direction.

This year, it was the innkeeper who caught my imagination. Of course, we know absolutely nothing about the innkeeper, so then the questions come – who would he/she be? Why would whoever it was take pity on the couple? Could they in fact have been family? After all, Joseph had come to the town of his ancestors for the census. And this time I got involved in the argument of inn vs guest-room, which muddied the waters some more.

I have included some short exegetical comments on each of the lectionary texts. I would use the Luke passage and the Psalm in a service and have concentrated on what inspired me in those texts. I had help from our OLM candidate, David Lloyd, who prepared the exegesis on the Titus reading.

[Luke 2:1-20](#)

Luke's gospel is one of the synoptic gospels, believed to be based on the same source as Matthew and Mark. The estimated date of writing is 85 CE.

The passage starts with Luke setting the date, which suggests historical authenticity and could date Jesus' birth. However it seems that he is mistaken, as the Quirinius census was in CE 6, while Matthew's comments would date Jesus' birth during the reign of Herod (BCE5 to 1CE).

Joseph's family came from the line of King David, which serves to fulfil the prophecies from the Old Testament. Bethlehem was a small town, so would have been overrun by the extra visitors for the census.

Luke tends to take a special interest in the poor and marginalised. We see this theme in the situation of Mary and Joseph, arriving in Bethlehem with nowhere to stay, and also the fact that Luke emphasised the role the shepherds played as first witnesses to the birth of Christ.

[Psalm 97](#)

This psalm is one of a group of psalms celebrating the reign of God. It is a psalm of rejoicing and tells of God's righteousness. The text is magnificent, full of rich language which creates the picture of an almighty God whose arrival brings lightning and earthquakes, causing the mountains to melt. This glory could be not just impressive but frightening, but this is countered by the description of God's righteousness. Humans rejoice at the sight of God and God's glory puts to shame the idols and images that humans might worship in place of God.

This psalm describes a magnificent God, a King of kings, omnipotent and “most high over all the earth”; “exalted far above all gods.” This serves as powerful contrast with the God who came down to earth in the body of one of God’s creatures. And, what is more, that God chose to come close to us in the weakest form possible – a tiny baby born away from home and in risky circumstances, to young, inexperienced parents. No pomp, no ceremony, no palace, but instead in a stable and with a manger for His bed. Most ordinary human babies would be welcomed into a much more comfortable situation.

[Isaiah 62: 6-12](#)

The book of Isaiah is prophecy aimed at those who were exiled in Babylon. Scholars tend to divide the text into three separate parts, written by three separate authors. It is thought that this part of the book was written by a prophet in Judah after the return from exile. In this text we have moved on from lamenting the fate of the exiles to providing hope for the restoration of the nation. The previous chapter contains the well-known text quoted by Jesus in the synagogue: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me ...” This chapter details the promise of deliverance and the restoration of the ruined cities and speaks of the return of Jerusalem to its position of importance. God will provide for the people and protect them.

[Titus 3:4-7](#)

Christmas is a time of family celebration and Christmas presents. The readings from Psalms and Luke are all about the coming of Christ and His birth in a stable, attended by very humble shepherds and, at the other end of the social scale, the wise men or kings bearing expensive gifts. But what did the birth of the Messiah mean? Titus gives us the answer. Jesus was a gift to us from God, and through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and resurrection we become reborn as members of God’s family with, as Paul writes, “...hope of eternal life”.

Paul’s letter to Titus talks a lot about how Christians should behave in society and towards one another. But the important point is that we are not saved by good deeds but by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Having received the gift of salvation we should, in turn, do good works to help others.

So at this time of giving we should reflect on the meaning of the gift God gave to us and how, through our behaviour, we can be inspired to help others and to live up to Christ’s command in John 13 to love one another as He has loved us.

Sermon ideas

In spite of being very much an extra in the drama, in some of our past Nativity plays, the innkeeper has had a big (usually comic) part – being portrayed as the hen-pecked husband or the weary host, getting quite bad tempered with all of the strange visitors ... So let's look at the innkeeper to see if there is anything that can be learned from that one short sentence.

In fact, of course, s/he is not actually mentioned at all but the traditional text mentions an inn and an inn implies the existence of an innkeeper. Furthermore, in other translations, which are actually closer to the Greek, the word used is guest room, not an inn at all, but more like the spare room of an ordinary house. So this person shrinks deeper into the shadows ... However, I don't think it matters too much – whoever this person was, they were someone who was resourceful enough to suggest the unthinkable and find the family somewhere to shelter. And it was a risky suggestion. Jews might find staying with livestock as more than uncomfortable – actually religiously unclean. Can you imagine that the Messiah is portrayed as being born as a 'beggar' who couldn't be a 'chooser?' No wonder there have been times that other religions have mocked our incarnation stories.

And why was there no room in a region of the world where tradition demanded total hospitality? Well, there was the census of course – Bethlehem, a small town, was completely overrun. And there are some who suggest that they weren't welcome in the family guest room – the scandal of Mary's unusual pregnancy might have reached the ears of the family in Bethlehem ... And what can we learn from this?

Well, I don't suppose that the innkeeper was expecting to see the Saviour of the world on that mega-busy evening in Bethlehem. After all, even if they had been expecting a Messiah, unless they knew their scriptures very well, they wouldn't have imagined that Bethlehem would be the place.

Remember the words from Micah and quoted in Matthew:

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah ...”

The Magi, of course, made the same mistake, with disastrous consequences.

The point is that our innkeeper took pity on the family-to-be anyway; BUT what if they hadn't? What if the innkeeper had said no, go away. Or what if they had been too embarrassed to offer the stable that might not have seemed good enough (which certainly

wasn't good enough!)? How often do we miss a chance to do good because we wonder how it would look? Maybe our living room is untidy, or our stable full of smelly animals? Or we don't do what we think we should to help because someone pours cold water on our idea, or because we're afraid of looking soft?

We should always be aware that God is all around us, in the people who cry out to us for help and compassion and to those who help us in our time of need. We can't know when God will cross our paths, we can't know when we'll be called on to carry out God's plans. So we just have to be alert enough to hear God's call and ready to step forward when needed.

This is where I start to think that the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-40 would be a more useful companion narrative:

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” (vv37-40, NIV.)

Maybe we only realise later that we have been in contact with God, and that we have just taken ... or missed the opportunity to answer God's call. If we want to avoid this we must always be prepared and expect to see God in strange guises in God's creation. And, just as God thinks out of the box, then so must we.

Prayers

The Lord is come!

'Joy to the world, the Lord is come!'

But not in the way expected.

You are the holy Creator, above all thought and imagination,
worthy of all honour and praise.

Yet here You are, a baby in a manger, completely dependent,
vulnerable to nature and the evil designs of human beings.

This is no safe place! And yet I feel safe.

For here You are

entering the same, real world in which I live.

Because this is how You came,
I can acknowledge that life is fragile,
but I can be less anxious.

Because this is how You came,

I can acknowledge that nothing in life is certain,
but I can still trust.

Help me in the days to come to cling to this news of God made human,
this good news of God with us, of God for us,
because here is the promise of renewed life,
of life in all its fullness, of eternal life.

And so here, at this manger, I know
that You alone are worthy of all honour and praise,
That life finds meaning and purpose,
that a frail world can hope again,
'Joy to the world, the Lord is come!'

Robert Pope, URC Prayer Handbook.

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

A suggested [playlist of songs for Christmas](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

- CH4 301 – “Hark! the herald angels sing”
- CH4 310 – “See him lying on a bed of straw” (the Calypso Carol)
- MP62 – “Born in the night, Mary’s child”
- MP179 – “Go, tell it on the mountain”
- “Bethlehem, are you willing?” – Nativity song written by Rev Irene Bom (Worship and Prayer Promoter for the International Presbytery)
https://www.irenebom.com/songwriter/song.php?song_id=47
- “We want to be ready” – (Don Besig) An appropriate piece for the choir to sing.

Christmas Day – Nativity of the Lord (III)

Prepared by Rev Keith Mack, Minister of Dalkeith St John's and King's Park Church.

Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 52:7-10 • Psalm 98 • Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12) • John 1:1-14

Introduction

In our Christmas Day service, we would normally have all ages in the service for the whole time, so we will have a bit of fun with the traditional 'bring your toys to church.' This can also be for all ages; sometimes the best bit is when an adult brings a wee gift and we can all share together in how lovely – or not – it is! As we share in the toys, we sometimes try and pull some theological meaning from the gift, the more tenuous the better!

Our Christmas Day service is pretty informal, but we keep Jesus at the centre of it all, and give thanks that God sent the Son to a manger to save us, to bring us home.

Sermon ideas – based on [John 1:1-14](#)

Every year we would have someone share "what Christmas means to me." This is clearly a personal experience of Christmas, so it is really someone's story of what their Christmas season is like, but centring on their experience of why Jesus is so vital to their Christmas celebrations.

Here are some ideas to explore around this theme:

- "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes" (John 1:14, The Message)
Explore the concept of the incarnation and what it means for Jesus to dwell in the neighbourhood.
- "The Light in the Darkness"
Focus on the imagery of Jesus as the Light that shines in the darkness, bringing hope and salvation to the world.
- "The Creator in the Cradle"
Discuss how John's Gospel emphasises Jesus as the Creator of all things and how this relates to His birth as a baby.

- “The Gift of Grace”
Reflect on the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ and how this is the ultimate Christmas present from God.
- “Witnesses to the Incarnation”; “We have seen his glory”; “What is our role?”
Encourage your congregation to be witnesses of the Incarnation and to share the message of Jesus’ birth with others.
- “From Glory to Manger”
Explore the humility of Jesus in leaving the glory of heaven to be born in a manger and what this teaches us about serving others.
- “Emmanuel: God With Us”
Dive into the significance of the name Emmanuel and how it signifies God’s presence and closeness to us.
- “The Word’s Invitation”
Extend an invitation to accept Christ as Saviour, as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
- “Living as Children of the Light: Responding to the Incarnation”
Explore what it means to live as children of the Light, following the example of Christ, who came into the world to bring salvation and transformation.

Prayers

Approach, thanksgiving and supplication

Gracious God, this is the day that You have made!

On this special day where we worship You for Your goodness and grace, where we gather together to celebrate the birth of Your Son into this world, we pause, to remember that You sent the light, the light of the world to bring hope to us all, to bring us our salvation.

We are grateful for the love, hope, and salvation You bring to our lives.

Help us to share this love with others
and to remember the true meaning of Christmas.

Emmanuel, “God with us”.

Lord God,
we thank You for the gift of family and friends who gather with us today.
May the joy and love of this season fill our hearts and homes.
May our relationships be strengthened, and our love deepened
as we celebrate the birth of Your Son.
Bless those who are not with us,
may they know the power of Your presence this day.

Jesus, as we ponder the cradle, we do not forget the cross,
that You came to see us free from our sin.
We give thanks that You gave Your life to see us free.
We are sorry, may we never forget what You have done for us.

On this day, we thank You for coming into the world
to fill us with light, love and joy.
Help us to be kind to others
and share Your love with everyone we meet.
Jesus, we remember You throughout this day
and every day, as we pray the prayer You taught us:

Our Father in heaven,

Intercessions / Prayer for others

Prince of Peace,
on this day of celebration, we pray for peace in our troubled world.
Inspire us to work towards reconciliation and harmony among all people.
Bless us with Your presence and guide us in Your ways.
Bless those in need,
and may the message of God coming to the earth
to bring light into the darkness
be central to our lives,
may we shine in the dark places.

We pray for all those who are alone or feeling isolated on this Christmas Day,
may they find comfort in the company of friends and family
and in the warmth of Your love, Lord.

We ask for Your blessing upon families gathered together today,
that they may cherish the moments of togetherness

and strengthen their bonds of love.

We pray for families that are separated at this time of year –
Lord bring Your comfort.

We pray for those less fortunate,
that they may experience the generosity and kindness of others
during this season of giving.

We remember those who are ill or suffering,
may they find healing and solace in Your loving presence,
especially during this season.

In a moment of silence, we bring before You our own prayers
for those we love,
for those in need.
Lord may You receive our prayers.

[Hold a time of silence]

Lord hear our prayers.
In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen

Closing blessing

May the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
fill your life with faith, hope, and love.

May His light guide you through challenging times,
and may His life inspire you to be a source of compassion
and kindness to all.

On this day and forevermore.
Amen

Musical suggestions

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You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

A suggested [playlist of songs from CH4 for Christmas](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website

- CH4 273 – “O come, O come, Emmanuel” – a wonderful advent hymn, in a beautiful minor key!
- CH4 306 – “O come, all ye faithful” – you can't have Christmas day without this one!
- “Here I am to worship (Light of the world)” – (Tim Hughes). This speaks of the incarnation with the theme of light
<https://songselect.ccli.com/songs/3266032/here-i-am-to-worship>
- “Joy to the world (Unspeakable joy)” – (Chris Tomlin). A traditional carol with a wonderful chorus!
<https://songselect.ccli.com/songs/5607039/joy-to-the-world-unspeakable-joy>
- “He shall reign forevermore” – (Chris Tomlin). This speaks of the light breaking through in a stable.
<https://songselect.ccli.com/songs/7050416/he-shall-reign-forevermore>

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.

- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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