

Worship for Christmas Day (complete text. A video version is also online)
Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Merry Christmas and welcome to worship with the South Warwickshire Methodist circuit.

It's good that you are joining us on this very special day, and if you are unable to meet with your loved ones today, we very much hope that you will feel part of God's family as we worship together. I thank those whose technical expertise has made it possible.

THE PREPARATION

Call to worship

Great and wonderful are the things
the Lord our God has done for us.
The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.



As we light this Christmas candle, may its flame be for us a sign of Jesus' birth.

Loving God, today – on this special day – you remind us

that you can use anyone and everyone for your purposes.

We willingly offer you all that we are and all that we have,
choosing to believe that who we are is enough to be used by you.

We do this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn: StF 195 – Christians, awake, salute the happy morn

**1. Christians, awake, salute the happy morn
whereon the Saviour of the world was born;
rise to adore the mystery of love,
which hosts of angels chanted from above;**

**with them the joyful tidings first begun
of God incarnate and the Virgin's Son.**

- 2. Then to the watchful shepherds it was told,
who heard the angelic herald's voice,
'Behold,
I bring good tidings of a Saviour's birth
to you and all the nations upon earth;
this day has God fulfilled his promised word,
this day is born a Saviour, Christ the Lord.'**
- 3. He spoke; and straightway the celestial choir
in hymns of joy, unknown before, conspire.
The praises of redeeming love they sang,
and heaven's whole orb with alleluias rang;
God's highest glory was their anthem still,
peace on the earth, in every heart goodwill.**
- 4. To Bethl'em straight the enlightened
shepherds ran,
to see, unfolding, God's eternal plan;
then to their flocks, still praising God,
return,
and their glad hearts with holy rapture burn;
amazed, the wondrous tidings they
proclaim,
the first apostles of his infant fame.**
- 5. Like Mary, let us ponder in our mind
God's wondrous love in saving humankind;
trace we the Babe, who has retrieved our
loss,
from his poor manger to his bitter cross;
treading his steps, assisted by his grace,
till our first heavenly state again takes place.**
- 6. Then may we hope, the angelic hosts
among,**

**to sing, redeemed, a glad triumphal song;
he who was born upon this joyful day
around us all his glory shall display;
saved by his love, incessant we shall sing
eternal praise to heaven's almighty King.**

John Byrom (1692–1763)

Prayer of approach

God of wonder,
with joy and celebration we gather today
to welcome afresh the gift of the child born to be
king;
Emmanuel, God with us;
light for the world and a beacon in the darkness.
Jesus Christ is born among us.
Jesus Christ is born for us.
Let us come to you and celebrate.
Amen.

Prayer of adoration

Gift giving God,
how mighty you are, how wondrous the gift you
have given.
Foretold and promised, now born among us:
how blessed we are!
Born to redeem us, to rescue and keep us:
how blessed we are!
Born to transform and take us to glory:
how blessed we are!
Born out of love, born to give love:
how blessed we are!
God incarnate, how blessed we are by your
extraordinary being.
**God gives to us his Son,
and to those who seek it, forgiveness for their
sins.**
**Go and share the gift,
show the love and know the peace that God
gives.**
Amen.

Prayer of confession

Let us make our confession to God:

Generous, overwhelming God,
in the excitement and joy of this day, we take a
moment to reflect and ponder on the immensity
of the gift given.

Forgive us if we have belittled the most precious
gift of all.

Forgive us if we have cast it aside, put it on the
back burner, left it packed away since last
Christmas with all the tinsel and trappings.

Forgive us for not pondering enough the depth
of your giving and sacrifice for us.

As you give to us, so we give to you our sorrow
and confession for all that has not been worthy
of your name.

Amen.

Declaration of forgiveness

God gives to us his Son,
and to those who seek it, forgiveness for their
sins.

Go and share the gift,
show the love and know the peace that God
gives.

Amen.

Hymn: StF 202 – Hark! The herald-angels sing

- 1. 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.'
*Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King.***
- 2. 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 men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel:

*Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King.*

3. 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 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.*

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSVA)

²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
³You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
⁴For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;

authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Psalms 96 (NRSVA)

Praise to God Who Comes in Judgement

¹O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
²Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
³Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvellous works among all the peoples.
⁴For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
⁵For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
⁶Honour and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
⁷Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
⁸Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
⁹Worship the Lord in holy splendour;
tremble before him, all the earth.
¹⁰Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never
be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.'
¹¹Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth
rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
¹² let the field exult, and everything in it.

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
¹³ before the Lord; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

Titus 2:11-14 (NRSVA)

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹²training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Luke 2:1-14 (NRSVA)

The Birth of Jesus

^{2:1}In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them,

and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

Sermon

For most of us, Christmas has been a long time coming. The first cards began to appear in the shops before the summer holidays were over. Since then, the preparations have gathered pace until they reach their climax today. Has it been worth it? Is Christmas coming up to expectations? If we are honest, probably not. For many of us, the reality of Christmas is quite different from the dream. The rush and excitement leave both adults and children exhausted. Family reunions rarely go as smoothly as we hope. We eat and drink too much and are tetchy as a result. We spend far more than we can afford, and are already worried about the January bills. It can all seem a long way from the angels' message of peace and joy.

The whole message of Christmas is one of contradiction, of sharp contrasts between expectation and actuality. The reading from the prophecy of Isaiah is a powerful expression of the ancient Jewish hope that God would send his Messiah to establish a kingdom in which all created things would live peacefully under his just and gentle rule. However, the hopes expressed in those marvellous names were never fulfilled in the history of Israel.

The angels' proclamation echoes the prophet's promise of peace and joy, and points to its fulfilment in the birth of the Christ Child. But 2000 years on, what can we make of this event? In a world torn apart by wars and civil conflict, it too seems to disappoint. Where is the Prince of Peace?

The message of the angels came in the darkness to shepherds who lived on the very edge of society. Their work was dirty and rough. It precluded them from Sabbath observance and excluded them from worship in the synagogue. Both socially and religiously, they were regarded as outsiders, yet they were the first to seek Jesus, and to spread the good news of his birth.

The Messiah revealed to the shepherds was not the majestic or triumphalist figure portrayed in Old Testament prophecies. He was a tiny baby, born in conditions of stark poverty. Whatever they might have been expecting, would it have been this? Yet the circumstances of this birth must have spoken to their situation as nothing else could. This is a Messiah who shares their poverty and their 'outsider' status. As Luke's Gospel progresses, we are shown again and again a saviour who keeps company with those on the edge of society: the poor, the foreigners, the sick and disabled, women.

Perhaps it is good when our illusions of the perfect Christmas are shattered. If we look for the Prince of Peace in the glitz and the hype that accompany our celebration, then we shall inevitably be disappointed. If we are to find him, and be touched by him, we have to look in the places we least expect, among the victims of war and famine, among those marginalized by poverty or failure, among those who, for whatever reason, simply do not fit in.

We also need to remember that it was the shepherds, the outsiders, who relayed the news of Jesus' birth to the people of Bethlehem. Is it possible that sometimes we are so preoccupied with preserving the status quo, and with our own status as insiders in the Church as well as socially and professionally, that we are deaf to what those outside have to say to us? We agonise about 'outreach' and 'mission', but perhaps sometimes it is equally important to welcome and listen to those outsiders who may already have seen the Prince of Peace.

It is thought that the first person to make a nativity scene was St Francis of Assisi in 1223. After a pilgrimage to Bethlehem, he told a friend he wanted to show people the simplicity and poverty into which the Christ child came. He made a scene, complete with ox and ass in a cave outside Greccio for midnight mass on Christmas Eve. How can we follow the example of St Francis and find creative ways to tell the Christmas story, so that people see it with new eyes?

The reading from Isaiah is a song of hope for people who lived in dark times. Even in the most uncertain of times, the hope is still there, the belief that into darkness God can and will shine light. We often miss out the middle verses, thinking that the boots of tramping warriors and blood-soaked garments are unsuitable for Christmas. Yet there are parts of the world today where the boots of soldiers are a real and valid threat. Matthew's Gospel tells us that this was the case in Bethlehem after that first Christmas. We remember today those who live in situations where the boots of warriors are a reality, that they will know the light of hope in their darkness.

Now more than ever does our world need Christmas; not the pristine angels or the idyllic

shepherds of movies and Christmas cards, but the real, messy, unsure and often fearful carriers of the Christmas message. Now more than ever our world needs the followers of Jesus to step out of our places of comfort and our communities of refuge to proclaim, not in words, but in action: God's favour, God's hope, God's love.

Our world needs Christmas not just today but every day.

God has work to do in this world; it is not enough that we be just, that we be righteous, and walk with God in holiness; it is not enough that we gather and say good things about Jesus in our beautiful places of worship. God needs us. We who are worried and wearied and terrified, the broken messengers with a living message. We must go out, like the shepherds to tell of the Good News in the messy, dirty and uninviting places of this world. We must go out to serve the ones forgotten and counted as nothing, because in them we serve Christ.

Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving

Thank you, gracious God,
for choosing shepherds to be witnesses to your Son's birth.

They were not rich or influential or of high standing,
but they listened to the good news of the angels.
They hurried from the fields to the stable.
They saw Jesus and believed him to be the Messiah.

They shared their joy with all those around them.
May we be like them and see, believe and share.
We ask this in the name of Jesus, Good Shepherd, Messiah and King.

Amen.

Hymn: StF 220 – When a young unmarried couple

- 1. When a young unmarried couple
tried to find a place to stay,
then a Middle-Eastern village
had no space, 'No, not today.'
Mary's pregnancy was clear.
'Go away! There's no room here!'**
- 2. Labour pains forced urgent action:
any shelter now till dawn!
In a shed to house the livestock
Mary's baby then was born —
nowhere for the child to lay
but a feeding trough with hay.**
- 3. Such undignified beginnings
for a child — no matter who —
yet this is the baby Jesus,
God's own Son! It's strange, but true:
our God comes among the poor
bringing hope for evermore.**
- 4. Songs that paint a cosy Christmas
miss the truth of God above!
See how God, rejected, homeless,
came a child with wide-eyed love.
Love transforms and brings release!
Love brings justice, joy and peace!**
- 5. Here's good news: our God is with us,
friend for life, in joy and need!
In rejection, pain and trouble
Jesus is our Friend in deed.
Baby child and dying Friend,
living Lord: love without end.**

Peter Relf (b. 1944)

THE RESPONSE

Prayers of thanksgiving

All praise to you, O God, for Jesus,
born for us, not in grandeur, but in humility.
All praise to you, O God, for Jesus,

a babe laid in a manger and shrouded with love.
All praise to you, O God, for Jesus,
given in a time of chaos to still the world.
All praise to you, O God, for Jesus,
who showed us how to live, how to love and how
to be.
All praise to you, O God, for Jesus,
who followed where you led, even unto death.
All praise to you, O God, for Jesus,
born then and now, for them and us and me.
All praise to you, O God, this Christmas Day.
Amen.

Prayers of intercession

As we join together in our prayers of
intercession, we think about friends who are in
need of our prayer; and of the news from around
the world this week and pray that God will be
with those who are suffering and in despair.

Let us pray:

God of Christmas,
as we unwrap our presents –
help us to remember those who have nothing.
As we eat our festive food –
help us to remember those who are hungry.
We have fun with our friends and family –
help us to remember those who are lonely.
We think about the birth of Jesus in a stable –
help us to remember all animals, and to be kind
to them.

We reflect that Mary gave birth a long way from
home –
help us to remember those in refugee camps
today.

As we enjoy being around those we love, in our
happiness –
help us to remember all who are sad today,
and entrust them to you.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray together:

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.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin 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.

The Offering & prayer

Our offerings may be received by our churches in
different ways at this time,
but we still offer them up to God today.
Everything in heaven and earth comes from you,
O Lord,
and of your own do we give you.

May you be praised for ever. Amen.

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn: StF 212 – 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!***
- True God of true God,
Light of Light eternal,**

lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father,
begotten, not created:
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the
Lord!

3. See how the shepherds,
summoned to his cradle,
leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;
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!

4. 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!

5. 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!

6. Yea, Lord, we greet thee,
born this happy morning,
Jesus, 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!

Latin, 18th century, possibly by
John Francis Wade (c. 1711–1786)
and others

Prayer & blessing

Loving God,
today, Christmas Day,
help us to look upon the food we share with
thanks,
help us to take joy in the company of our friends
and family,
help us to be thankful for all the gifts with which
you bless us.

In the name of Jesus, who is born in hearts again
today.

Amen.

We go in the peace of Christ.

Thanks be to God.

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StF 195 – Christians, awake, salute the happy morn

John Byrom (1692–1763)

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition.

StF 202 – Hark! The herald-angels sing

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition.

Hymn: StF 212 – O come, all ye faithful

Latin, 18th century, possibly by

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Permission Sought

StF 220 – When a young unmarried couple

Peter Relf (b. 1944)

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition

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Bible Verses

NRSV & NRSVA

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