

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

Christmas Hymns and Carols



Sunday 27th December – Wednesday 6th January

Introduction

Over Christmas season we will look at various hymns and carols associated with this time of year and reflect on them and the Biblical stories they relate to. We hope that, in these strange times, a feast of music will help lift our spirits.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Sunday 27th December - The Candle Song	2
Monday 28th December - The Coventry Carol.....	5
Tuesday 29th December - It Came upon the Midnight Clear.....	7
Wednesday 30th December - In the Bleak Mid Winter.....	9
Thursday 31st December - Joy to the World.....	12
Friday 1st January 2021 - What Child Is This?.....	15
Saturday 2nd January - Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day	17
Sunday 3rd January - Who Would Think That What Was Needed	20
Monday 4th January - O Come All Ye Faithful	23
Tuesday 5th January - See in Yonder Manger Low	26
Wednesday 6th January - We Three Kings	28

[Sunday 27th December - The Candle Song](#)

The Rev'd Martin Knight is minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)

Candle lighting has long been part of Catholic and Orthodox spirituality but was treated with suspicion at the Reformation. It's interesting that in many of our churches we have, at least in Advent, lit candles and we realise that it's now a popular part of spirituality. Kendrick recognises this with his modern song.

St John 1: 1-9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through

5: Glorious now behold Him arise, King and God and Sacrifice
Alleluia, Alleluia, Earth to heav'n replies

Reflection

And so the Christmas season comes to an end with Epiphany - but in our culture, of course, the decorations have been taken down in public places and the carols stopped on Christmas day. In many countries an older custom of giving gifts today is followed - in honour of the mysterious magi who brought gifts to Jesus. Today's carol is probably the most popular of all the Epiphany hymns but is often omitted from hymnbooks - it's not in the Church of Scotland's CH4, our Rejoice and Sing, the Methodism's Singing the Faith nor was it in the Churches of Christ's Christian Hymnody nor Congregational Praise. It remains in Mission Praise and in the popular imagination. It is a shame that editors of hymn books don't like it as there is rich theology here about the gifts presented to the Christ-Child.

Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for a sacrifice. The threefold aspect of who Jesus was laid bare in these gifts. Heaven only knows what Mary and Joseph made of them though I suspect the gold and frankincense, in particular, would have been useful when they were in Exile in Egypt. Maybe they sold the gifts to survive as refugees now have to sell all they have in order to make perilous journeys to safety.

At the start of this new year we offer ourselves to God again as living gifts. We don't know how we will be used, how our churches will respond to and recover from all that we endured in 2020, but we know that as we offer our gifts to God we will be blessed just as the wise ones, years ago, were blessed in their act of giving.

Prayer

Take our gifts, of time, of talent, of treasure, O God, and use them for your glory. Amen.

him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

The Candle Song

Graham Kendrick © 1988 Make Way Music,

You can hear the song here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teZaQUKjx24>

Like a candle flame

Flickering small in our darkness

Uncreated light

Shines through infant eyes

Stars and angels sing

Yet the earth sleeps in shadows

Can this tiny spark

Set a world on fire?

God is with us, alleluia

God is with us, alleluia

Come to save us, alleluia

Come to save us

Alleluia!

Yet his light shall shine

From our lives, Spirit blazing

As we touch the flame

Of his holy fire

Reflection

I find candlelight beguiling.

It draws me in.

It's fizz in the dark is profoundly hopeful.

The dimness and shadow of winter in the northern hemisphere means that we welcome the sparkle of tealights awakening our souls, reminding us of warmth and brightness.

The popularity of Graham Kendrick's song is testament to our longing for the light. 'God is with us', we are told, like a candle flame flickering in the darkness.

You will know a shaded space in your own life, and we all know it in the

life of the world. How we long for a flames glow!

We can be forgiven, in this space between Christmas and New Year, for having shrunk away from the blazing Christ light. It is hard to hold Christ's dazzling love at the front of our daily lives for too long, as the reality of the shadows creep in again.

'Can this tiny spark set a world on fire?'

Yes. Yes it can!

Here is a reminder that any glimmer of God's presence in the shadows of life, can spark the kind of hope and joy that can beguile us and draw us in - igniting change, exposing injustice, giving warmth that comforts and heals.

John's words, so often read at the end of Lessons and Carols, are a stark and wonderful reminder of how God is with us: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it'.

Here is light for us and for all.
Here is light for us to reflect.
Here is light that saves us.

In this weird space after Christmas, the light still shines.
Thanks be to God!

Prayer

God with us,
We give thanks for the light of the world.
Shine in our night, we pray.
Shine in the world's shadows.
Shine through infant eyes, and let us sing
'Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia' Amen

often banished from our hymnbooks! It theologizes the meaning of the three gifts.

St Matthew 2: 7-11

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We Three Kings Of Orient Are John Henry Hopkins Jr 1857

You can hear this here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lx35_DRIZ8g

We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar
Field and fountain,
moor and mountain
Following yonder star

*O Star of wonder, star of night
Star with royal beauty bright
Westward leading,
still proceeding
Guide us to thy Perfect Light*

2: Born a King
on Bethlehem's plain

Gold I bring to crown Him again
King forever, ceasing never
Over us all to reign

3: Frankincense to offer have I
Incense owns a Deity nigh
Prayer and praising, all folk raising
Worship Him, God most high

4: Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom
Sorrowing, sighing,
bleeding, dying
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb

nativity plays and Christmas stories so many times before. We need him, and look forward to retelling this part of his story, which helps us remember that Jesus was fully human, born as one of us, a person in history.

“See in Yonder Manger Low” invites us to see and love Jesus, this little fragile Lamb. The capital letter of Lamb as a symbol opens up another way to see him, familiar from the gospel of John and the book of Revelation. The child in the manger we adore is also the one in the throne room of God, adored by the angels, and the faithful witnesses of heaven. The one through whom all things were made. The eternal judge. Our saviour who reconciles broken humanity to the One in whose image we are made.

And so, between the tender words of a folk carol, breaks in an anthem worthy of the heavenly host. Weighty tones, rich and resonant which invite us to open our hearts again, and not just to the infant Jesus but to Christ the Creator and Ruler of all.

Prayer

Christ, let us know your majesty.

As we imagine the throne room of heaven –

so awesome it might make us weep at its beauty –

may we glimpse the enormity of what you have done in bringing heaven to earth,

divine to human, the unimaginable to everyday.

We whisper another holy name – Emmanuel – and listen for the chorus in heaven who also know and celebrate that God is with us.

Wednesday 6th January - We Three Kings

The Rev'd Andy Braunston works with four URCs in and around Glasgow.

John Henry Hopkins, a priest of the Episcopal Church in America wrote this for a Christmas pageant and it has become a firm favourite though

Monday 28th December - The Coventry Carol

The Rev'd Ruth Watson Bolton and Salford Missional Partnership Minister

Both the words and music of this carol date back to the middle ages and put in sung form the dramatic, and horrific, slaughter of the Innocents. Annie Lennox's version of it is particularly haunting.

St Matthew 2: 16-18

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

The Coventry Carol

You can hear Annie Lennox's version here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItVWs4jDYsw>

Lullay, lullay

My little tiny child

By-by, lullay, lullay

Oh, sisters too

how may we do

for to preserve this day?

This poor youngling

of whom we do sing.

By-by, lullay, lullay.

Herod the King

in his raging

charged he hath this day.

His men of might

in his own sight

all children young to slay.

Then woe is me

poor child for thee,

and ever mourn and say.

For thy parting

nor say, nor sing.

By-by, lullay, lullay.

Reflection

This carol has a haunting, chilling tone to it, as it reminds us of the horror of Herod's act to maintain his position. It is not often heard in churches as we like to sing the rousing carols of celebration. But it appeals to me as it shows us that the Nativity was never a cosy little tableau where everything was easy – where the straw was soft and gentle, and a glowing light surrounded everyone's head.

There is no pain worse than losing a child – at whatever age. Before birth, it is often hard for the mother to acknowledge her motherhood as she has nothing to show for it. When a baby is lost we mourn the potential of what could have been. As the child ages, their loss is no less felt, as the potential that has been lost is keenly felt and parents have to deal with the guilt that they feel as they think that it should have been them first.

To be with someone who has suffered the loss of a child, while heavily pregnant, or cradling your own baby brings almost unbearable feelings of guilt and almost a sense of wanting to hide what you have to protect the one who has lost. Yet often this does not help, as those who are suffering want to know that life goes on. But the grief does not go away. The guilt of loss stays with you, however well you learn to manage it. I wonder what Mary made of it all.....

Prayer

Lord there is no greater loss than that of a child. But you have been there, as you have given up your precious Son for us. Be with us in our mourning that we may know your comfort, that we may know you share in our suffering and show us the light at the end of our darkness. For your light is the hope we need always. Amen

reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

See in Yonder Manger Low
Edward Caswall (1814-1878)

You can hear Annie Lennox's version of this hymn here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAMbRDGabXw>

See in yonder manger low,
Born for us on earth below,
See--the gentle Lamb appears,
Promised from eternal years.

*Hail the ever blessed morn;
Hail redemption's happy dawn;
Sing through all Jerusalem:
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"*

2 Lo, within a stable lies
He who built the starry skies,
He who, throned in height sublime,
Sits amid the cherubim.

3 Sacred Infant, all divine,
What a tender love was Thine,
Thus to come from highest bliss
Down to such a world as this.

4 Teach, oh, teach us, holy Child, by Thy face so meek and mild,
Teach us to resemble Thee in Thy sweet humility.

Reflection

By the eleventh day of Christmas we have known a lot of sugar. We may have over-indulged on puddings, cake, marzipan and icing. In our worship, too, we may have been tempted to indulge the sweetness over the meat (or plant-based protein) of the Christmas story. Our carol today tries to bring some balance to our diet, a little like the cheese served with Yorkshire Christmas cake.

Perhaps we have been reflecting on the vulnerability of Jesus, born as a human baby to young parents. We might be imagining ourselves into the role of father, midwife, shepherd, cousin and counting fingers and toes on the Christ-child. This is the baby Jesus who enchanted us through

SO come on! Let us adore him by looking after our neighbours, strangers, families and friends; spend time with them, if not in person, then on the phone, do the shopping, deliver some food, or small homemade gifts, and help them meet the Jesus we adore.

Prayer

God of unfailing love and faithfulness,
we ask that you bless us as we try to be like you,
as we try to share our faith, try to help our neighbours.
Sometimes we forget even worse,
sometimes we choose to turn away when we see someone in need.
Help us to be as you were in the world and help us, in loving others
to show them just how much we adore you. Amen

Tuesday 5th January - See in Yonder Manger Low

The Rev'd Dr 'frin Lewis-Smith is a healthcare chaplain in Salford and a member of Tonge Moor URC

Originally a much longer hymn the first verse has alternate opening lines. The last verse, deemed too Catholic for Protestant hymnals runs: Virgin Mother, Mary blest, By the joys that fill thy breast, Pray for us, that we may prove, Worthy of the Saviour's love.

Colossians 1: 15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to

Tuesday 29th December - It Came upon the Midnight Clear

The Rev'd Geoffrey Clarke is Moderator of East Midlands Synod and a member of St Andrew's with Castle Gate, Nottingham

This carol by Edward Sears is a firm favourite across the denominations despite the Unitarianism of the writer. In the hymn Sears laments the world at war not hearing the message the angels brought. In the UK it is usually sung to Arthur Sullivan's tune Noel.

St Luke 2: 13 - 14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear (Edward Sears 1849)

You can hear this carol here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtV477Cqni0>

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending
near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth,
goodwill to men,
From heaven's all-gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.

2: Still through the cloven
skies they come,
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heavenly
music floats
O'er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains,
They bend on hovering wing,
And ever o'er its babel sounds
The blessed angels sing.

3: Yet with the woes
of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain
have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And we at bitter war hear not
The love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.

4: And ye, beneath
life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now!
for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!

5: For lo!, the days are hastening on, by prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years comes round the age of gold
When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing.

Reflection

One among many of the embarrassing moments in my life was the occasion I chose to compliment the choir leader of a local Anglican church after Evensong. “How brave of the choir to sing in Latin”, I remarked. What was intended as a compliment was rapidly identified as an insult. The anthem had been sung in English! Sadly, as a hearer I had clearly not heard the words they were singing.

In this classic carol Edward Sears observes that humanity fails to hear the song of the angels. In our case, he suggests, the angels struggle to be heard due to the “noise” of “strife”. The editors of Rejoice and Sing revised it effectively: ... and we, at bitter war, hear not the love-song which they bring: O hush the noise and end the strife, to hear the angels sing. This carol highlights both the message of Christmas and the challenge to hear and respond. The angels are the preachers and heralds; the “cloven skies” their pulpit. Their message – their love-song – is that the Word-made-Flesh is among us. At times that message may sound like an anthem in another language: a Word proclaimed and

4 Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning:
Jesus, to thee be all glory giv'n;
Word of the Father, late in flesh appearing;

Reflection

John’s description of Jesus as ‘the Word’, was understood by both Greeks and Jews of his time. For the Greeks, it referred to the powers that sustain the universe, whilst for the Jews it was a reminder that back in Genesis, when God spoke, the world was created. The Word was an expression of God’s wisdom and creative power and the audience of the day was perplexed by the audacious claim that ‘the Word’ became a person and was both 100% human and 100% divine.

The hymn writer picks up the theme in this favourite carol, and whilst I’m slightly uncomfortable about the triumphalism of the first line, I love to sing it as the descant soars and we celebrate Jesus with us in the world (when we’re allowed to sing), though I wonder, do we think about the lyrics?

O come, let us adore him!

How do we ‘adore him’ now, in the 21st century, at a time of pandemic with present and future economic crisis? What can we learn from God becoming human?

The clue is at the end of the Bible passage and the final line of the carol: “... the Word...lived among us ... full of grace and truth”. Another translation says: “...full of unfailing love and faithfulness”. Jesus lived as human and humans must live like Jesus, sharing our faith in unfailing love for others.

At the start of this new year, worse than most of us can remember, there are many people who are lonely, isolated, unwell in body and spirit, grieving loved ones and sorely missing family and friends

overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

O Come All Ye Faithful
Latin 18th Century, possibly by John Francis Wade (1711-1786)

You can hear the carol here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRq8eywc57I>

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;	2 God of God, Light of Light; lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb; very God, begotten not created;
--	--

<i>O come, let us adore him;</i> <i>O come, let us adore him;</i> <i>O come, let us adore him,</i> <i>Christ the Lord!</i>	3 Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation, sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above; glory to God, all glory in the highest;
---	---

translated into the everyday “strife” of human encounter. One day, we are assured, peace will prevail. Until then our challenge is to hush our noise and be quiet long enough for God to get a Word in edgeways – the Word that Elijah perceived at Horeb in “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12); the Word that in a backyard in Bethlehem, drowned out by the noise from the inn, Mary “pondered ... in her heart” (Luke 2:19)

The angels’ “glorious song of old” may well not have been sung at midnight but it is when we seek and find “solemn stillness” that we stand a chance of hearing angels – and receiving the Presence that is Christmas.

Prayer

God of cloven skies and angels’ love-song,
grant that within the noise of this season
we may find space for solemn stillness and know you in sheer silence.
Translate, for us, angelic anthems into common parlance,
that with Mary we may ponder
the song and treasure the Word made flesh in Jesus.
In his name and for his sake
may we pledge ourselves anew as heralds and makers of peace
and enable his Word to get in edgeways. Amen.

[Wednesday 30th December - In the Bleak Mid Winter](#)
Michael RJ Topple, Lay Preacher and Elder of Chappel URC

Christina Rossetti was the daughter of an Italian refugee. She was raised as a High Church Anglican and broke off her engagement when her fiance converted to Catholicism. She wrote this hymn as a poem and it didn't appear in hymnbook until 1906 - after she'd died. The English Hymnal editors paired the poem with the tune by Holst and it has remained remarkably popular ever since.

Philippians 2: 5 - 11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name

that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In the Bleak Mid Winter

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

You can hear this carol here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SE0aIQp9V4s>

In the bleak mid-winter

Frosty wind made moan,

Earth stood hard as iron,

Water like a stone;

Snow had fallen, snow on snow,

Snow on snow,

In the bleak mid-winter

Long ago.

2: Our God,

Heaven cannot hold Him

Nor earth sustain;

Heaven and earth shall flee away

When He comes to reign:

In the bleak mid-winter

A stable-place sufficed

The Lord God Almighty,

Jesus Christ.

Entering the New Year opens up a new vision, a vision rooted in the far distant past, yet opening up God's future. Isaiah reminds us of God's challenge to open our eyes and ears so that we see and hear more than is in front of us in the present moment. It's a reminder not to be confounded by negativity, but to focus on God's love that carries us through our suffering and enables us to carry others through their suffering.

Prayer

Grant to me, O loving God, a share in the gift that you gave to Jesus for all the world and the whole of time.

May I receive the spirit of wisdom and understanding.

May I see your creation with new eyes.

May I hear your word in new ways.

At the beginning of this New Year,

may I not be so distracted by the present moment

that I fail to grasp your eternal vision. Amen

[Monday 4th January - O Come All Ye Faithful](#)

Linda Rayner is a member at Bramhall URC and URC Coordinator for Fresh Expressions

The earliest version of this hymn, in Latin, is in a book by John Francis Wade but there is note in it attributing it to an earlier author. The English version sung is by the Catholic priest Fr Frederick Oakeley and dates to 1841. The hymn puts in verse form traditional theology about Jesus.

St John 1: 1 - 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not

2: Shepherds watch
and wise men wonder,
monarchs scorn and angels sing,
such a place as none would reckon
hosts a holy helpless thing.

Stable beasts & by-passed strangers
watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas Day.

3: Centuries of skill and science span the past from which we move,
yet experience questions whether, with such progress we improve.
While the human lot we ponder, lest our hopes and humour fray,
God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day.

Reflection

‘Who would think that what was needed...?’

This past year has seen a major amount of re-thinking about what is needed, not only in health, but also in economics and finance, in personal life, in creation, in racial justice and in the whole sense of what it means to mutually belong to one another and care for each other. Is what lies ahead a return to what there was before? Or is it an abandonment of everything that has been, in favour of what is new?

Entering into the New Year opens up the possibility of seeing a new vision. But this vision is not one where the past is abandoned. It’s a vision which connects with the deeper roots and values that have sustained us, even in the midst of the most difficult times.

The birth of Jesus, in the darkness of the stable, and yet in the fulfilment of historic prophecies, points to the vision that sustains God’s people over the centuries, through plagues, pandemics, war and suffering. It’s not the myth of the inexorability of human progress that gives hope. It’s God’s surprising and loving presence, on the side of the poor and the meek, bringing together animals and children, there for the whole of creation, that opens up new possibilities.

3: Enough for Him, whom
cherubim
Worship night and day,
A breastful of milk
And a mangerful of hay;
Enough for Him, whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.

4: Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air,
But only His mother
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

5: What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give Him, give my heart.

Reflection

Here we have two beautiful pieces of poetry, both of which are eminently suitable for Christmastide.

Unlike many other passages in Philippians Paul is not focussing on joy here. Instead he focusses on the Son of God, one with God in all things (“hands that flung stars into space”), dwelling in the heavens, choosing to condescend and live the life of a first century Palestinian man. Paul focusses on the One who, although given every opportunity to avoid it, submitted to torture and death (“to cruel nails surrendered”).

Yet, as we read, Jesus’ ministry did not stop there. Because, as we know, the grave was no match for the Son of God. God raised Him up, giving Him the Name above all names (“’tis the Father’s pleasure we should call Him Lord”).

But none of this would have happened had Jesus not condescended to live our life. None of this would have happened if God had not chosen to “enter our world, His glory veiled”.

Today’s Christmas carol, Victorian yuletide imagery aside (was it really

snowing in Bethlehem?), focusses on Christ's coming to earth as a babe. It focusses on His physical and practical needs ("a breastful of milk and a mangerful of hay").

But I think the carol is about much more than wintery Palestine, or the various animals gathered around the manger. I think it shows how God did not choose to redeem the world through gifts; nor did He choose to redeem the world through money, or fine oratory, or complex law books. Instead He chose to redeem the world through flesh and blood, through the giving of a heart - the life of One for the lives of all. We too, in the confused world in which we live, can only hope to minister effectively and faithfully if we are ready to give our hearts in His service.

Prayer

Lord
of the manger and stranger,
of the wintry scene and the stark Cross,
of the orphan and sick,
of light and love,
Hear us as we pray.
Grant us Your grace,
that we may offer our hearts and lives to You,
as we seek to proclaim Your Son through our words and deeds. Amen

Thursday 31st December - Joy to the World

Dr Sam Richards, serving as Head of Children's and Youth Work, member of mayBe community, Oxford.

Isaac Watts' great paraphrase of Psalm 98 has been voted, evidently, the most popular Christmas hymn in North America. It's more of an Advent, rather than Christmas hymn and could be used at any time of the year (though it would be a brave minister or worship leader who suggested its use in the summer!)

or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Who Would Think That What Was Needed?

John Bell and Graham Maule © Wild Goose Worship Resource Group

You can hear this hymn to the tune White Rosettes here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PMXG0s-ncU&t=5s>

and to Scarlet Ribbons here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCvWqNZI-7w>

Who would think
that what was needed
to transform and save the earth
might not be a plan or army,
proud in purpose proved in worth?

Who would think despite derision,
that a child might lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas Day.

the good and the difficult times. We can try to fight the turning of time, and many people do – with facelifts, mid-life crisis, or just makeup and a really good wardrobe selection. But to dance even with time, the many stages and happenings of life – can we join that dance here, before we join in the dance at the heavenly wedding feast one day?

Prayer

God, we cannot fully grasp all you have done –
from the beginning to the end.
Christ, we are amazed at your dancing
through your life on earth and your resurrected life.
Holy Spirit, call us to join in the dance.
Teach us the steps.
Help us to move to your rhythms, we pray. Amen.

Sunday 3rd January - Who Would Think That What Was Needed

The Rev'd Dr Elizabeth Welch, retired from pastoral charge, active ecumenically and theologically, member of St Andrew's Church, Ealing.

John Bell and Graham Maule's Christmas carol is a moving reflection on how God surprises us. It is often sung to Scarlet Ribbons rather than the tune White Rosettes for which it was written.

Isaiah 11: 1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things.
His right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory.
The Lord has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

Joy to the World Isaac Watts

You can hear, a contemporary arrangement, of this hymn here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Xo64Q2ucQ8>

Joy to the World; the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King! Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room, and Heaven and nature sing.	2: Joy to the earth, the Saviour reigns! Let all their songs employ; while fields & floods, rocks, hills & plains repeat the sounding joy.
---	---

3: No more let sins
and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make
his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

4: He rules the world
with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love.

2. Then was I born
of a virgin pure,
of her I took fleshly substance
Thus was I knit to man's nature
To call my true love to my dance.

4. Then afterwards
baptized I was;
The Holy Ghost on me did glance,
My Father's voice
heard from above,
To call my true love
to my dance.

Reflection

For me, this is a perfect marriage of words and music – and singing it draws me in to its truth. It moves me. Without a doubt my favourite carol.

St Augustine, fifth century North African bishop, said ‘those who sing pray twice’. Singing brings our whole selves into the act of praise, uniting heart and mind, words and melody. We may cringe with embarrassment when asked to join in an action song, or to dance whilst we praise, but children and young people often embrace the embodiment of worship in these ways. Learning British Sign Language or Makaton can further ensure our bodies are caught up in our worship, and connect us more deeply to the meaning of the words we sing.

The Wesley brothers understood that the theology that takes root in our lives is the theology we sing, rather than the theology we hear. Most of us could probably quote more hymns and worship songs by heart than Bible verses, and certainly than sermons!

I write at a time when singing together is not possible (to help prevent the spread of Covid 19). I pray the situation will have improved by the time you are reading this. How much harder it is to praise and worship in isolation – how much do we long for the time when we can gather to worship and sing in a foretaste of the courts of heaven when the unnumbered throng of all people groups will sing praises together.

For me the very act of singing this hymn ushers in joy. Joy in my heart.

3. In a manger laid,
and wrapped I was
So very poor,
this was my chance
Betwixt an ox and a silly poor ass
To call my true love to my dance.

Reflection

The metaphor of battling exists in various ways in the English speaking mindset. We battle through traffic, battle through life, we stand our ground, fight our corners... Life is a struggle, a battle of wills – may the strongest survive! But what if instead of a battle, we see life as a dance? To see life as a dance... tango, foxtrot, waltz, jive – whatever the style, you have to accept and move with your partner for the dance to work. If you fight your partner in every step choice, you won't get a 5 let alone a perfect score of 10. Battling focusses on opposition and winning, but dancing focuses on movement, beauty, and partnership.

Dancing is the metaphor used in this song, as it reflects key points in the life of Jesus. Every life event is an opportunity to “call [Jesus’] true love to [his] dance.” His life, death and resurrection is our invitation to join in the dance. His prayerful intercessions for us at the right hand of God not the solemn occasion you might expect, but rather a dance that we are invited to join!

And if, like me, you hear the Byrds singing “turn, turn, turn” as you read the passage from Ecclesiastes, maybe the turning is not just the turning of time, but the turning that comes with dancing – “in every season” –

with the redemption.

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8, 11

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.
He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day
William Sandys 1833

1. Tomorrow shall be
my dancing day;
I would my true love
did so chance
to see the legend of my play,
to call my true love to my dance;

*Sing, oh! my love, oh! my love,
my love, my love,
this have I done for my true love*

Joy to the world. What better way to mark the ending of one year and the birth of the next than to respond to the Biblical command to sing to the Lord with these wonderful and powerful words.

Prayer

Help us to lift our voices in praise to you, our Lord and saviour,
Unhindered by self-consciousness,
Knowing our heartfelt praise will always sound sweet to your ear
And in harmony with the eternal praise of heaven.
Joy to the world. Amen.

[Friday 1st January 2021 - What Child Is This?](#)

The Rev'd ELizabeth Gray-King, Education & Learning Programme Officer,
member St Columba's Oxford

Born in Bristol, Dix spend most of his life selling marine insurance in Glasgow writing hymns in his spare time. He wrote this hymn for the late medieval tune Greensleeves contrasting cute images of the nativity with the horror of what is to come.

St Matthew 2: 1-6

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

What Child Is This

W Chatterton Dix (1837-98)

You can hear this here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRfPUrsnejg>

What Child is this who, laid to rest
on Mary's lap is sleeping?

Whom angels greet
with anthems sweet,
while shepherds watch
are keeping?

This, this is Christ the King,
whom shepherds guard
and angels sing;
haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

2. Why lies He in such mean estate,
where ox and ass are feeding?

Good Christians, fear,
for sinners here
the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear

shall pierce Him through,
the cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

3. So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh, come peasant, king to own Him;
the King of kings salvation brings, let loving hearts enthrone Him.

Raise, raise a song on high, the Virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born, the Babe, the Son of Mary.

Reflection

As a child I adored this hymn and its tune, Greensleeves. I still love it. It's a Christmas hymn telling difficult truth while affirming that Holy Christ is the child of Mary. It tells the truth of Jesus' death whilst asking us to enthrone, rise and sing even as we've sung these hard truths. The Greensleeves lilting melody doesn't soften the hard news and it lifts and settles the whole story.

I write this for the first day of a new year following a year which some say disappeared or should be forever forgotten. I beg us to see what Dix asked us to see, as Greensleeves carried us through his words. The child

who some welcomed brought fear in others. Jesus' story is the whole cycle of birth and joy, death and pain, eternal life to be joyfully celebrated. The story in all our lives is as human as Jesus' life – birth, pain, death, eternity. As we live, we are repeating cycles of new births, new pains, new resurrections. Our lives are a flurry of renewal, each cycle allowing us to be closer to the child of Mary.

2020 was awash with renewal cycles, awash with the pain of each one. In hindsight we see things which could have been different, we grieve for so much and for so many. In hindsight we see our risks, our learning. Like this hymn sees, I plead that we don't unsee; that we look into the stories of 2020 and name their truths. Rather than the lilt of Greensleeves to carry us, we have the lilt and love and power of our very present Holy Spirit, carrying us through such seeing to focus into the resurrections, the transformations, the affirmations of life from the deepest places and peoples. Blessed New Year.

Prayer

Glorious God, give us courage to come out of personal fear and anger. Hold us as we linger over what we've hidden until we can bear resting in you as we look. Let us know your lilting love as you settle us in peace over what we cannot change. Resurrect our hope. Give us grace and creativity to share our restoration so that your Hope becomes power for all people. Amen.

[Saturday 2nd January - Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day](#)

The Rev'd Angela Rigby, Minister at St Johns Hill URC Sevenoaks and Christ Church URC Tonbridge

Published in 1833 this song has its origins in the medieval mystery plays where the actor playing Christ would sing the verses and the audience would sing the chorus. It was not uncommon to have the baby Jesus singing all 12 verses foretelling his life, and death linking the incarnation