

WINCHESTER, EASTLEIGH & ROMSEY CIRCUIT

Service at Home 8th January 2023

Love Without Limits

prepared by Pat Fry

Introduction

As I write this my decorations are still up, it is only the sixth day of Christmas, so I would like to take some time to reflect on the Christmas story, though by the time you read this the decorations will have been packed away, and most churches will be celebrating Covenant, which I know you did very appropriately on the first day of the New Year.

Prayer of Approach

Loving God, We may have finished the turkey, taken down the tree and put away the decorations, and all may seem dull and ordinary again. Help us to take the message of Christmas with us into the New Year to light our way and keep us hopeful through the love of Jesus. Amen.

A Hymn for Epiphany StF 231

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkHbQNtm9mA>

The silent stars shine down on us with
bright but sightless eye,
unmindful of our little earth,
of us who live and die.
Are we but grains of stranded sand
beside a cosmic sea,
that lie unvalued and unseen
in such immensity?

Creator of all stars, you came
to grace our transient race.
In Christ you spoke a Word that broke
the silences of space.
Still through that Word you call our hearts
to know that we are known,
to trust we do not walk through time
unvalued and alone.

We see the stars the Wise Men saw,
and hope again is stirred.
We track the footsteps left in time
by your incarnate Word.
We see them climb a lonely hill
where Love is left to die,
The Love that formed the farthest star
and hears the faintest cry.

O Christ the bright and Morning star whose
radiance does not fade,
whose glory filled the universe
before the planets played.:
come heal our hearts of blinding doubt
till faith shall end in sight.
Shine down upon our darkened earth
and conquer sin's long night.

Herman G Stuempfle Jr (1923 -2007)

Prayer of Praise and Confession

Gracious God we bring our thanks and
praise that you assure us we are not alone.
In Jesus you understand what it means to
be human, to struggle, to enjoy family and
friendship, to face misunderstanding, pain
and loneliness, the full breadth of human
experience.

So we wonder and we worship. Help us to
trust in your unfailing presence, however
we are feeling, in good and bad times alike.

Gracious God, we ask your forgiveness for
the times we find it hard to trust, for the
times we neglect your call to show your love
to others, for the times we get bogged
down in trivia. Help us to know that in Jesus
we are forgiven and invited to walk more
closely with Him. Amen.

Reading John 1:1-18

Now a poem reflecting on this reading, a
poem written by Rev. David Scott, who was
Rector of St Lawrence. Winchester, for
several years, as well as being a nationally
acclaimed poet. Reading his book again,

shortly after his death last month, I discovered this beautiful poem about the Christmas readings -

Nine Lessons and Carols

Every Christmas I wish St John would come and read the final lesson for himself.

Then I could listen for his run of syllables: his subtle language, the changes solved.

I'd hear his tone of voice, watch his eyes, anything that could expose reality and help the statutory feasting time of Christmas unfold more naturally.

And would John be surprised by the words St Matthew wrote and set beside

John's Greek: words we know quite well like stable, baby, straw, and star; none of which St John had wish to spell.

So we are left to wonder in the annual rush, whether one can be resolved into the other, all swaddled somehow into the hush of manger with both light and child and mother.

Copyright David Scott from *Beyond the Drift*, Bloodaxe Books 2014

Reflection

The poem poses a serious question. The narratives in Luke and Matthew are very different from John's more poetic, philosophical expression. How do you bring together such different ways of thinking about the mystery of the incarnation, of God coming among us?

During Advent in 2022 the churches in the northern section of the Circuit studied the Gospel accounts in Matthew and Luke, considering what we might learn from the Shepherds, the Sages and the Singers in these stories.

At the United Church we explored these themes in artwork displayed on the big blue screens at the front of our church, and in a Christmas tree prayer trail around the church, as well as in study groups and sermons.

The message this brought home loud and clear, not just for Christmas but for all time, was that the love of God is for each and all, with no exceptions. the full breadth of this promise.

In the familiar stories from Matthew and Luke, we learn that the light comes to very different people, people who are willing to listen, but very different.

A young couple beginning their life together; an old priest and his wife faithful through years of disappointment; two devout elderly people in the temple, nearing the end of their lives; shepherds, the rough workmen who were outsiders, unwelcome in the synagogue; devout seekers after truth from a very different culture.

Isn't that what John was also saying?

John talks of the Light coming into the world and giving those who accepted it the opportunity to become children of God.

John says no one has seen God, but the Father's beloved Son has made him known, and throughout his earthly ministry Jesus welcomed a wide range of people, many of whom were considered unacceptable by the religious leaders of the day.

Yet this was not an easy lesson to learn, even for the first disciples. Today's set reading from the Acts of the Apostles carries the same message. It's part of a very long story, so let me explain what has happened. Peter had travelled to Joppa, to encourage Christian believers there. One night he had a strange dream.

He dreamt a cloth full of live creatures was lowered from the sky in front of him, and a voice was ordering him to kill and eat food that was ritually unclean, absolutely forbidden. He refused but the scene was repeated twice more. He awoke feeling very puzzled. Then messengers came from a Roman officer saying an angel had told him to send for Peter who has a message for him from God. So Peter went with them, even though such contact with non-Jews was unlawful, and found a good man who wanted to know about Jesus. Then the meaning of the dream became clear: that the love of God includes everyone, even the Jews greatest enemies, the Romans.

Reading: Acts 10: 34-43

This is the great message of God's love, that reaches through time to include each of us. The story is so familiar that perhaps we are tempted to forget to be grateful. This is the love we need to receive in humility and gratitude.

But it is also a challenge.

We should take time to reflect on what limits we put on the love of God, what hinders us from sharing what we know of the love of God in Christ more widely. Do we let our expectations and traditions get in the way? Do we put up barriers, maybe unintentionally?

In this New Year let's be ready to be welcoming, accepting, and make space for the love of God to shine through. Amen

John Bell's hymn based on John 1 takes up this theme.

Hymn StF 101

www.youtube.com/watch?v=xt6jygkmSc8

Before the World began,
one Word was there:
grounded in God he was,
rooted in care:
by him all things were made,
in him was love displayed,
through him God spoke and said
"I am for You."

Life found in him its source,
death found its end:
light found in him its course,
darkness its friend.
For neither death nor doubt,
nor darkness can put out
the glow of God, the shout
"I am for you."

The Word was in the world
which from him came:
unrecognised he was,
unknown by name;
one with all humankind,
with the unloved aligned,
convincing sight and mind
"I am for you."

All who received the Word
by God were blessed;
sisters and brothers they
of earth's fond guest.
So did the Word of grace
proclaim in time and space
and with a human face,
"I am for you."

John L Bell (b 1949) & Graham Maule (b 1958)

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God, we bring our prayers for the wider world, our own communities and ourselves.

We pray for world leaders, the leaders of our own country, and the leaders of powerful multi-national companies. We long for them to seek true justice, to show concern for the poorest, to seek lasting

peace, and to work together to address the climate crisis. It seems an impossible dream, yet once again we pray for it, hoping that in some way the prayers of so many faithful people will be answered.

We pray about the crisis in our nation's economy where so many people are dependent on food banks, where charities are struggling to meet the demands, and where public services are seriously understaffed and underfunded, where local councils are faced with difficult choices. We pray for wisdom and foresight for those in positions of authority.

We pray for people close to despair and pray that some word of wisdom, some act of kindness, or a moment of beauty may reach into their pain and give them hope.

We pray for people we know personally in particular need may they know the blessing of your comfort.

We pray for ourselves. Sometimes we feel completely helpless and useless in the face of the world's problems. Help us to find that sense of peace only you can give - not peace of mind through a closed mind or through complacency, but through trust in the way of our Lord and Saviour.

Where we have a part to play in contributing to the answer to our prayers, show us your way and give us courage to follow it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn StF 411

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_7xVzliVvY

May the God of Hope go with us every day filling all our lives with love and joy & peace, May the God of justice speed us on our way bringing light and hope to every land and race.

*Praying, let us work for peace,
singing share our joy with all
working for a world that's new
faithful when we hear Christ's call.*

God will be our shepherd as we go our way,
and will not forsake us when we go astray.
Even though the load of life is hard to bear,
we must not forget that God is always
there.

*Praying, let us work for peace,
singing share our joy with all
working for a world that's new
faithful when we hear Christ's call.*

v.1 Spanish traditional translated Alvin Schutmaat,
v.2 Ann Mitchell

Prayer

Gracious God, may the ways you have come close to us in the Christmas season not be forgotten, but remain in our memories to be a rich source to lift us when times are painful, and humble us when things go well. For you are our light, our life and our salvation.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

David Jenkins, from Seasons and Celebrations NCEC

The Grace

As you join in the words of the Grace, hold in your mind the people with whom you would like to share it

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with each of us,
and with those we love, now and for ever,
Amen