

This document is for those sharing this recorded carol service, with our greetings and prayers.

Imagine you are in Glenorchy church Exmouth; it is December 20, the Sunday before Christmas 2020. We can light all four Advent candles, reminding us that Christmas is almost here. You can sing out loud at home if you wish, which is more than those of us in the church can do!

We prepare for worship with a poem by Donald Hilton:

The Advent candles shine to tell the time of Christmas dawning.

*The candles, the candles, how easily the flames could be put out —
a puff of wind would mark their end,*

*a finger pressed against a thumb would do the trick,
first one, then two and three and four, then nothing.*

*And we from this year's lights would journey back to darkness:
no Christmas tree this year, no cause for decoration nor for gifts,
no carols, since no child to sing about.*

*The child, the child, how easily that child could be put out —
a more determined Herod, parents lacking care,*

a traitor lurking with the shepherds,

*or simply hunger in an age which so much of early death, or lingering starvation;
then no young man to teach and preach, to heal and save.*

*The young man, the young man on his cross, how easily then life could be put out —
a soldier's spear, a hail of stones, a long slow ebbing of all energy and strength,
all human life hangs merely on a thread.*

And so it was on Calvary hill: the light went out, the price of being human.

Or so they said, who could not wait a mere three days to find the fulness of the truth.

Advent promise; Christmas Lord; Easter Christ — your flame will never die, nor will our faith.

O Lord, how shall I meet you? That question is beautifully answered in this advent hymn, translated from the German of Paul Gerhardt by Catherine Winkworth and set to a chorale harmonised by J S Bach.

O LORD, how shall I meet you, how welcome you aright?

Your people long to greet you, my hope, my heart's delight!

*O kindle, Lord most holy, a lamp within my breast,
to do in spirit lowly all that may please you best.*

*Love caused your incarnation, love brought you
down to me;*

*your thirst for my salvation procured my liberty:
O love beyond all telling, that led you to embrace
in love all love excelling our lost and fallen race.*

*A heavenly hope you give me, a treasure safe on high,
that will not fail nor leave me as earthly riches fly.*

*My heart shall bloom for ever with joyful praises new,
and from your name shall never withhold the honour due.*

An opening prayer:

We have waited for your coming, Lord Jesus Christ, but our hope has a note of anxiety and uncertainty.

We are ill-prepared for the wonder of your birth, life and death in which we see into the heart of God.

Forgive us if all our planning of practicalities has masked the inner meaning.

But now as we approach the heart of Christmas, we open our hearts and minds to what grace really means.

The time has come. The promise is fulfilled. God has visited his people in the person of his Son.

God who made us now remakes us. Thanks be to God, Creator and Saviour.

In the book of the prophet Isaiah, the promise is spelt out:

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.
You 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.
For 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.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For 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.
His 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.*

So let us worship our generous, creative God in the name and spirit of Jesus, called Emmanuel, God with us.
The Christmas story begins with the Annunciation, the visit of Gabriel to the young Mary.
For three carols in this service we are led by the choir of Kings College Cambridge.

*The Angel Gabriel from heaven came, his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;
'All Hail', said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary, most highly favoured lady.' Gloria!*

*'For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be, all generations laud and honour thee,
thy Son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold; most highly favoured lady.' Gloria!*

*Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head; 'To me be as it pleaseth God', she said,
'my soul shall laud and magnify his holy name': most highly favoured lady. Gloria!*

*Of her, Immanuel the Christ was born in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world will ever say 'Most highly favoured lady'. Gloria!*

The poet Christian Rosetti supplies the words for our next poem and the carol which follows it.

*1 Before the paling of the stars, before the winter morn,
before the earliest cock-crow, Jesus Christ was born.
Born in a stable, cradled in a manger,
in the world his hands had made born a stranger.*

*2 Priest and king lay fast asleep in Jerusalem;
young and old lay fast asleep in crowded Bethlehem.
Saint and angel, ox and ass, kept a watch together
before the Christmas daybreak in the winter weather.*

*3 Jesus on his mother's breast in the stable cold,
spotless Lamb of God was he, shepherd of the fold.
Let us kneel with Mary maid, with Joseph bent and hoary,
with saint and angel, ox and ass, to hail the king of glory.*

Her familiar carol also sets the story in winter, cold and bleak.

*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.*

*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.*

*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.*

*Angels and archangels may have gathered there, cherubim and seraphim throngèd the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss, worshipped the Beloved with a kiss.*

*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.*

Now we hear from Matthew's Gospel a summary version of the birth story.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'
When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Writers and musicians have tried to capture the scene as have countless artists.

Here is a gentle lullaby from Poland, translated by Edith Reed.

*Infant holy, infant lowly, for his bed a cattle stall;
oxen lowing, little knowing Christ the Babe is Lord of all.
Swift are winging angels singing, nowells ringing, tidings bringing:
Christ the Babe is Lord of all; Christ the Babe is Lord of all.*

*Flocks are sleeping, shepherds keeping vigil till the morning new
see the glory, hear the story, tidings of a gospel true.
Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow, praises voicing, greet the morrow:
Christ the Babe is born for you! Christ the Babe is born for you!*

The sceptic poet and novelist Thomas Hardy wishes it were true for him:

*Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock;
"Now they are all on their knees"
an elder said as we sat in a flock
by the embers in hearthside ease.*

*We pictured the meek mild creatures where
they dwelt in their straw-filled pen,
nor did it occur to one of us there
to doubt they were kneeling then.*

*So fair a fancy few would weave
in these years! Yet I feel
if someone said on Christmas Eve,
"come see the oxen kneel
in the lonely barton by yonder combe
our childhood used to know",
I would go with him in the gloom,
hoping it might be so.*

In that spirit we may say 'let us go even unto Bethlehem'. The original story is taken on by Luke's Gospel:

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see -I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' 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!' When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, with the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

Our next carol reflects on the experience of those shepherds. It is derived from an American spiritual:

Chorus: *Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere:
go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.*

*While shepherds kept their watching o'er silent flocks by night,
behold, throughout the heavens there shone a holy light:* *chorus*

*The shepherds feared and trembled when, lo, above the earth
rang out the angel chorus that hailed our Saviour's birth:* *chorus*

*Down in a lonely manger the humble Christ was born;
and God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn:* *chorus*

Some time later, maybe a year or more actually, as Matthew tells it, some visitors from the East arrived to see the new baby, by now living in a house not a stable.

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."'

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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Here in the church we shall now bring up our offerings, a gentle reminder to those not with us at Glenorchy that funds are still needed by the church and by so many charities. Do give generously.

As our offertory prayer we sing this verse:

*As they offered gifts most rare at thy cradle plain and bare;
so may we with holy joy, pure, and free from sin's alloy,
all our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to thee, our heavenly King.*

Matthew and Luke have interpreted the birth of Jesus in their own ways, highlighting its historical context. John's Gospel takes the larger view of the mystery of Emmanuel, God with us.

*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 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. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

The reflection which follows is the weekly reflection circulated to Glenorchy members and friends and can also be found on the church website at www.glenorchychurch.org.uk

Those in church are increasingly wishing they could sing out loud (and loudly), as maybe those sharing in the recording are able to. Never more so than in the next great carol which includes the final verse, normally reserved for Christmas Day only, in which we greet the 'Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing'.

*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:*

Chorus: *O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.*

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

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation, sing, all ye citizens of heaven above, 'Glory to God in the highest':

Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning, Jesus, to thee be glory given; Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing:

Now we offer our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession for others.

Please pause the recording for a few moments to add your own silent reflection and prayer.

Then we will join in the Lord's Prayer using this version:

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.*

Give us today our daily bread.

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

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

Our final carol is by W C Dix, who also wrote 'As with gladness'.

It gently and wonderfully sums up all that Christmas can mean to us, the story and the mystery, and invites us to celebrate the babe, the son of Mary, who would go on to become our crucified and risen Saviour.

*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 worship and angels sing;
haste, haste to bring him praise, the Babe, the son of Mary.*

*Why lies he in so poor a place where ox and ass are feeding?
Come have no 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 Saviour comes, the Babe, the son of Mary.*

*So bring him incense, gold and myrrh, all tongues and peoples own him,
the King of kings salvation brings, let every heart enthrone him.
Raise, raise your song on high while Mary sings a lullaby,
joy, joy, for Christ is born, the Babe, the son of Mary.*

And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Spirit, be with us and all whom we love and pray for, this Christmas season, into whatever the new year brings, and for evermore. Amen.

THANKS FOR BEING PART OF THIS ACT OF WORSHIP. HAPPY CHRISTMAS!

FULL ORDER OF SERVICE:

Glenorchy carols December 20, 2020

led by Peter Brain

(Duty Elder lights four candles in advance; hymn numbers in Rejoice & Sing)

Welcome and introduction

Poem: The advent candles shine read by Wendy Marshall

140 O Lord, how shall I meet you (organ)

Prayer

Reading: Isaiah 9, vv 2-7 read by Brian Chapman

139 The angel Gabriel (recorded)

Poem: Before the paling of the stars read by Sheila Johnstone

162 In the bleak midwinter (organ)

Reading: Matthew 1, vv18-21 read by Diana Austen

149 Infant holy (recorded)

Poem: The oxen read by Pamela Diffey

Reading: Luke 2, vv 8-20 read by Jean Curl

164 Go, tell it on the mountain (organ)

Reading: Matthew 2, vv 1-12 read by Peter Johnstone

Offertory brought up

184 v3 as a prayer (organ)

Reading John 1, vv 1-18 read by Sheila Brain

Short comment

160 O come all ye faithful vv 1,2,5,6 (recorded)

Prayers and Lord's Prayer

170 What child is this? (organ)

The Blessing