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**Christmas Day 2023**

**The Revd Dr Susan Durber**

**A Call to Worship**

A boy has been born for us; a ***child has been given to us.***

Once we were no people; ***now we are God’s people.***

Once we walked in darkness; ***now we have seen a great light.***

 *(from Isaiah 9 and 1 Peter 2)*

**Prayers of Approach and Confession**

Loving God, we come,

through empty expectant streets and lanes, (or on Zoom),

on the one day of the year that feels really different.

We bring with us to worship on Christmas day the excited child inside us

and the harassed, overworked grown up,

the person who aches for the loss of someone once here

and the joy of love or life so cherished.

We come bringing the person we are everyday

and the person we would like to be and hope to be.

We come like the shepherds,

because someone told us to come.

We come like the wise men

because we’ve worked out for ourselves that this is wisdom.

And we come like Mary and Joseph,

because it’s what we always do

in response to your call.

We come in awestruck praise

like people visiting any baby

and we see, as if for the first time,

the miracle of your love for us.

As we worship you, and see what you reveal to us this day,

give us a different place from which to look at the world,

to let go of our old selves,

and to be human beings newly born.

Like parents of a new child, change us forever.

Before the wonder of your gift to us, of your very self,

may we know that you offer nothing less

than forgiveness, hope and peace,

and may we receive these gifts this day and all our days,

for they come from your open and loving hands. Amen.

**A declaration of Forgiveness**

Today, a child is born, and we are re-born,

forgiven, free, remade, restored,

to start again on the way of life,
with the news of our redemption, fresh and joyful,

on this holy day of new birth.
Thanks be to God.

**An introduction/all-age talk: A Christmas Story**

Below you will find a script for way of telling the Christmas story that has a refrain. Tell the story with all the drama you can muster and just indicate to the congregation that they can join in the refrain. They will soon catch on! The idea for a repeated response to join in with came from Jesus’ Christmas Party by Nicholas Allan.

It all started with the Romans counting the people. Of course, they weren’t counting out of curiosity. They wanted to know how many people there were to pay taxes. It’s the same with any new government some people say. Taxes go up. So, when the letters about the census came round many people just said, **‘I knew this would happen’.**

Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to be counted, because that’s where his family came from. It wasn’t a good time. Mary was in the final stages of pregnancy and it was a long journey. But she didn’t want to stay at home either, so off they went. And then, just as they got to Bethlehem, with no room booked and not even knowing where there was a midwife, her labour started.. Mary got in a panic and just shouted at Joseph..

**‘I knew this would happen’.**

Joseph hadn’t been sure about taking Mary on at all. She never seemed quite like the other girls. Rather prone to religion, being visited by angels, that sort of thing. And everyone knows that something usually goes wrong with that kind of girl. She’d been trouble from the start. Joseph could remember what his mother had said when he’d told her that Mary was already pregnant, ‘**I knew this would happen.’**

The innkeeper was getting very stressed. It seemed that everyone was coming to Bethlehem and no one was leaving, so every room was booked, some of them even double booked. There were arguments over the rooms, there were too many donkeys for the yard, and there was even one family who had to bed down in the stable for the night… The innkeeper just said, **‘I knew this would happen’.**

But then the baby was born and they wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in the manger. They called him Jesus and looked at him in the silence of the night. And they loved him, as any parents might love their child, And Mary, much calmer now, said,

**‘I knew this would happen’.**

That same night some shepherds came to visit them. One of the shepherds told Mary what an angel had told them, that this child is the Messiah, bringing peace from God. And Mary treasured their words and thought about them, especially when one of them said to her, **‘I knew this would happen’**.

Then a while later some wise men came to visit them, men who knew the secrets of the stars and all the wisdom of the East. They brought with them gifts that were promises for the future, gold for a King, incense to worship God, and myrrh a sign of death. And when, years later, one of the wise men heard of the death of Jesus, he said,

**‘I knew this would happen’.**

And then Mary and Joseph took the child to the Temple to present him to the Lord. And there was a man in the Temple called Simeon, who was holy and devout, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him that he wouldn’t die until he had seen the Messiah. So Simeon took the child in his arms, praised God and said, with a sense of great peace and joy, **‘I knew this would happen’**.

And so for thousands of years people have heard this story and lived by it and been changed by it, told it to their children, remembered it each year, and heard in it the message of the angels..Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace…

And God says, **‘I knew this would happen..’**

**A prayer for Illumination**

Oh God, who switched on all the lights with the birth of your Son,

 shine your light into our hearts today that we may be bright with your love

 and bring joy and hope to your beloved world, Amen.

**Reading**

*St Luke 2:1-16*

**Sermon Notes**

There are those who think a sermon on Christmas Day is not appropriate, arguing that you need a short service, that all ages are likely to be present (if you are blessed!) and people are eager to celebrate, travel or get home to the cooking. But all these things make it no less important for the Word of God to be proclaimed – it’s just that it’s best done in a way appropriate for such a joyful day. The Incarnation is, after all, a key moment (if not the key moment) of our faith. We celebrate that God was made flesh among us, blessing our human flesh, and indeed all Creation, with holiness.

There are so many things that could be said about any of the Christmas readings, but it’s good to focus on one key idea for your sermon and to find a vivid way of communicating it to a Christmas Day congregation. Not everyone, of course, will be feeling the unadulterated excitement we expect from children. There will be a mix of emotions in any gathering – and the Christmas story speaks well into such a mix. But it is always good to find something specific to say.

In looking at Luke 2 there is so much one could reflect on. It’s probably not the best time to speculate about whether or not there actually was such a census as the one described. In a way it doesn’t matter. What is important is the way the story relates the common experience we might all share of returning ‘home’ (something that often happens at Christmas of course) – and of finding ourselves in crowded accommodation, with relatives. It also reflects the common human experience of lives being shaped by government decisions, the movement of populations, and the precariousness of life.

You might want to spend time reading the Luke text carefully and engaging with its particular account – and not the whole range of details that Nativity plays have acquired from other Gospels, Old Testament allusions and folk stories. Concentrate on Luke’s particular account here. Notice that Mary and Joseph go back to be with Joseph’s family in Jerusalem (it is through Joseph that Jesus is ‘of David’s line’). There was no place for them in the guest accommodation (that’s closer to the Greek than the ‘inn’), and so Jesus was laid in a manger. There are a few different approaches you could take:

1. Why does this short passage mention the ‘manger’ three times? Some argue that this is laden with significance, that Jesus, placed in the feeding trough, is God’s new source of life and nourishment for the world. (I once conducted a communion service at Christmas time in which I hid the bread and wine in a makeshift manger until they were needed and then drew them from there…). Jesus is the bread of life…Is that what Luke is trying to tell his readers?

2. You might spend some time researching where a manger might have been in an ordinary first century Palestinian house – and demystify it a bit (see my sermon if that helps). Every house would have had one for the animals that most people kept and it would have been a convenient place to lay a small child – rather like taking a drawer from the chest of drawers in a bedroom. It may not have been a peculiar thing to do at all, but rather an ordinary one.

3. You might reflect about the significance of the shepherds being those who were the first to hear the good news. Shepherds were working in the night-time economy of the time, deprived of sleep, little regarded by other people. You might speculate about who might be the equivalents today. Jesus might have been born in the city of David (signifying his importance), but he was also first worshipped by those who, like the young King David, were shepherds, out in the fields, perhaps the people held in least esteem by many.

4. You might ask yourself what Luke is trying to tell us as he recounts this story – is he perhaps doing his best to help us see how Jesus came to renew the people of God. He was the new David, the restorer of a the nation, the one who brings with him all the promises of the prophets… And we, also in need of renewal, are invited to welcome Jesus into our ‘rooms’ and hearts and homes.

**Affirmation of Faith**

On Christmas Day, ***we celebrate and rejoice***

for the grace of God has dawned upon the world, ***bringing salvation to everyone.***
Now we wait in joyful hope ***for the glory of God to be revealed,***

in every home and every nation, ***so that people everywhere will be glad this day.***

*(based on Titus 2:11-14)*

**Prayers of intercession for the World**

O God, we will say ‘thank you’ today in many ways,
for presents kindly meant,
for just what we wanted
for people we love
for good food..

But right now we say ‘thank you’ to you for showing us that human life is holy
and that our flesh can carry your presence and your love …

We pray that you will help us to learn and live
the faith that all flesh is holy,
all people made in your image, all of us your beloved children..

Help us to see your image in our own families and friends..

Help us to see your image in those who are hungry in Yemen and fearful in Ukraine, Palestine and Israel.

Help to see your image in those in prison today and those who are fleeing poverty.

Help us to see your image in those who are sad and depressed
and those who can find no peace.

Help us to see your image wherever there are people in need or sorrow..

Give us grace, from this day on,
to see every human face as made in your image
and every human body as a place where you are known.

Bless our own bodies and our own lives with your holy love,

So that whatever befalls us we will know

our true dignity and our true worth, and that we are loved.

In the name of God, whose beloved Son taught us to pray saying…Our Father…

**Offertory Introduction and Prayer**

We are not all shepherds,

not always wise,

and we might not sing like angels.

We have no gold,

no incense and no myrhh,

but we offer what we have,

ourselves, our lives, our wealth,

to the child in the manger…

this day and always, Amen.

**Blessing**

‘Then spread the table, clear the hall,

and celebrate till day is done;

let peace go deep within us all,

and joy be shared by everyone:

laugh and make merry with your friends,

and praise the love that never ends!’

(Brian Wren, final verse of hymn 466 in R&S)

May the love of the Creator
made present in the child of Bethlehem

and with us today through the Holy Spirit,

bless you with joy, hope and peace,

today and always, Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| See in yonder manger low / See amid the winter’s snow | 157 | 313 | 215 | 588 |
| Who would think that was needed | 178 | 295 | 222 |  |
| O Come all ye faithful  | 160 | 306 | 212 | 491 |

RS – *Rejoice and Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*