

# worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Christmas Eve 2023  
Midnight Communion  
The Revd Andy Braunston

## Call to Worship

O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and redeem us – held captive to the pressures and ideologies of our age. **O Come, O Come Emmanuel!**

O Come, O Come, Wisdom from on high, teach us Your ways, that we may turn away from the insanity of our world. **O Come, O Come Emmanuel!**

O come, O Come, You Spring of Day, disperse the clouds of gloom which blind us to what's going on in our world. **O Come, O Come Emmanuel!**

O Come, O Come, Desire of nations, teach us the ways of peace. That we may turn our back on war and terror. **O Come, O Come Emmanuel!**

## Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Forgiveness

Long ago, O Most High,  
your prophet foretold of a great light,  
shining in the gloom, increasing joy, and bringing freedom.  
On a hillside in Palestine,  
angels proclaimed Your glory to poor shepherds  
and announced peace on earth.  
Since those times we've waited  
for the culmination of the hope of peace and glory.  
Yet as we wait, we prefer the gloom to the light,  
war and terror more than peace,  
despondency and doubt more than hope and glory.

Forgive us, Lord Jesus,  
when we've turned away from Your message,  
when we've justified violence,  
when pragmatism and expediency have triumphed hope and faith.

Give us time to change Most Holy Spirit,  
that as we hear again the ancient prophecies and stories,  
we may be moved to dream your dreams of peace and justice,

and work to change our world into the coming Kingdom. Amen.

Dear friends, we are kin to each other in Christ,  
hear again the words of the angels "Do not be afraid; for see -  
I am bringing you good news of great joy"  
Your sins are forgiven – have the strength to forgive others  
and forgive yourselves. Amen.

## Prayer for Illumination

Break open your word to us, O God, that as people walking in darkness  
we may see the great light that comes from You, shining from the Bible,  
illuminating Your Word to us, Jesus Christ, Amen.

## Readings

*Isaiah 9: 2 – 7 | Titus 2:11-14 | St Luke 2:1-20*

## Sermon Notes

Christmas is a time of contradictions: we gather with our wider families to celebrate the birth of a child whose own wider family is missing from the story. We enjoy the warmth of homes and hospitality to mark a birth in a cold draughty stable. People gather to hear and sing the angels' words of peace in a world at war where messages of peace are shouted down. But we've been round the block a few times and know the contradictions of Christmas as they echo the contradictions of Christianity.

We celebrate the birth of a child who was driven into exile due to Herod's murderous rage. We ponder the child who grew up into an itinerant preacher to proclaimed freedom to the oppressed, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberation to the poor. For this he was rejected, despised, feared, and killed. And for this he was vindicated by God who raised him on high.

This baby whose birth we celebrate this night grew up and preached a message that would and still does change the world. A message that challenges and transforms us, a message that is so subversive we resist it. A message that causes governments and institutions to cringe if it's spelled out to them.

What if we really believed in the angels' message of peace – how might we reconcile peace on earth with the evil that stalks our world committed to terror, land grabs, apartheid, and injustice? Can we deal peacefully with bullies? It's a puzzle that is as old as Christianity itself. The first converts to the faith were pacifist; Roman soldiers who converted had to leave the army but after a while the Church adapted itself to what it saw as realities and before too long the Church found ways to approve of war and violence.

And what if we believed in Jesus' absolute ability to tell the truth? Could we, like Jesus, tell the truth but at the same time hold such influence as we have without being written off as naïve? To speak truth to power is something the Church needs to do more instead of cosying up to it.

And there's the contradiction of forgiveness. Jesus taught us to forgive, to not let another have power over us as we hold on to the hurt, the anger, and the wounds that have beset us. Further, Jesus taught that we are to forgive if we are to hope to be forgiven. Forgiveness is hard; it's not to forget nor is it to act as if the sin never happened. It is to say that this person, this act, this circumstance no longer has power over me. It is to free oneself from a cycle of anger and despair but it's so hard.

These contradictions and challenges intrigue, puzzle, annoy, and – dare I say it – delight us. We must work out how to follow Christ for ourselves. We must work out how to understand the puzzle of a God who became human, how glory is found in a stable and, later, in a rubbish tip. We must see how weakness is strong, how vulnerability is key, and how humility and grace are ways of wisdom.

The ancients longed for a Messiah, a chosen one, who would free them from oppression, drive out the invaders – whether that was Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks or Romans - and set them free. They longed for a political and military leader – like the ones that had been raised up in the past – who would restore their fortunes. Yet their longings were unfulfilled. Instead, God's own self took on flesh and, in the weakness of a poor itinerant preacher, showed a different path; a way both clear and contradictory to live.

In the vulnerability of a baby, wrapped in a woman's blood, born into poverty and exile, worshipped by shepherds, sheltered in a stable wisdom is found. A wisdom that contradicts that of our world. A wisdom that offers us life, freedom, and grace. A wisdom seen in a baby's soft sleep.

## Affirmation of Faith

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 increased our joy O God!**

For the yoke of our burden, and the bar across our shoulders, the rod of our oppressor, have been broken. **You have increased our joy O God!**

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. **You have increased our joy O God!**

We are not afraid. We believe in the good news of great joy for all the people, the birth of Christ, You tabernacled with us, for **You have increased our joy O God!**

Glory to You, O God, in the highest heaven! We believe that peace on earth will come if we work at it. **You have increased our joy O God!**

## Intercessions

In a world at war, we hear the angels song of peace. In a world of terror, we see strength unveiled in the weakness of a baby. In a world of might, we see grace in vulnerability and so we bring our prayers to the Most High.

At the end of each prayer I will say “we hear the angels sing, O God” please respond with “**give us peace and justice.**”

Eternal One,  
we pray for all who are looking for shelter this night,  
displaced by war, terror, poverty, trafficking, climate change and greed. Give grace to  
Your people that we might be welcoming  
just as the inn keeper of Bethlehem once was.

*Pause*

We hear the angels sing, O God. **Give us peace and justice.**

Lord Jesus,  
we pray for all who work for peace this night & seek to alleviate suffering,  
hated by the press, rounded on by combatants, & made to look foolish.  
Give Your wisdom to peacemakers and peacekeepers,  
that the song of the angels may come true.

*pause*

We hear the angels sing, O God. **Give us peace and justice.**

Most Holy Spirit,  
We pray for those who search for meaning and purpose this night,  
for those who, like the shepherds, don't know what they are looking for,  
for those, like the Magi, who explore from faraway places,  
for those, like the innkeeper, who find purpose thrust upon them.  
Give Your Church the wit and wisdom to help those who search,  
so that all restless hearts find their rest in You.

*pause*

We hear the angels sing, O God. **Give us peace and justice.**

Eternal Trinity of Love,  
we bring before You all whom we love and worry about this night.

*longer pause*

We hear the angels sing, O God. **Give us peace and justice.**

We unite all our prayers as we pray as Jesus taught saying, Our Father...

## Offering

Christmas is about giving; ever since the Magi brought their gifts to the Holy Family we've been giving gifts. Gifts of love, gifts of need, gifts of grace. We give because we delight in the joy that giving brings; we give because it's good for us. God loves cheerful givers but copes well with grumpy ones too! So tonight we give; we give of our time, our talents, and our treasure.

God of giving,  
we thank You for the many gifts You shower upon us;  
gifts of love, gifts of grace, the gift of Your very self in Jesus.  
As a mother delights in the joy of her children, you delight in us.  
And so we thank you for these gifts; give us the grace to use them wisely,  
that through our lives and these gifts, Your kingdom may come. Amen.

## Holy Communion

Long ago, at midnight, the angels proclaimed the birth of Christ,  
and shepherds rushed to the stable to see their Messiah.

Long ago, at midnight, peace and goodwill to all were proclaimed,  
and the heavenly choirs sang of God's glory.

Here and now, at midnight, we gather around this table  
and welcome Jesus again into our hearts and lives.

Just as, in the night,  
Jesus shared in the simplicity of a meal with his friends,  
so now we share in the everyday things of bread and wine,  
knowing that our lives are changed,  
our spirits lifted and our bodies and souls fed by Jesus' own self  
as we are lifted from the things of earth  
to be united with the Church in every age and place,  
as we enjoy the presence of the Most High,  
who shines us as the stars of night.

Long ago Jesus took bread, said the ancient blessing,  
broke the bread, and gave it to his friends saying:

"Take this all of you and eat it, this is my body, broken for you.  
Do this in memory of me."

In the same way, when meal was over, Jesus took the wine, said the ancient words of blessing, and gave it to his friends saying:

“Take this, all of you, and drink from it.  
This is the cup of my blood,  
the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.  
It will be shed for you and for all,  
so that sins may be forgiven.  
Do this in memory of me.”

Let us proclaim the central mystery of our faith:

**Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!**

Eternal One,  
send now your Spirit on these gifts of bread and wine,  
which we have separated from all common use,  
that they may be the communion with the body and blood  
of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
Send now your Spirit on us, gifts of your creation,  
rich and varied though we are,  
united in our desire to serve you, make peace, and proclaim justice.  
As these gifts feed our bodies and nurture our souls,  
so may we feed Your people, proclaim Your Gospel,  
and nurture the weak,  
that they, with us, will find in You, strength and joy.

Bless with Your love all who gather around tables like these this night,  
and all who search for you with sincere hearts,  
that in the wonder and love of this season,  
all creation may sing Your praise, proclaim your peace  
and find restless hearts stilled.

Through Jesus, with Jesus and in Jesus,  
with the Holy Spirit,  
all glory and honour is Yours,  
our Rock and Redeemer,  
now and forever, Amen.  
These are holy gifts for holy people.  
Eat and drink remembering that Christ was born and died for you  
and now feeds You with his own self.

## Post Communion Prayer

O God, creator of the stars of night,  
You have met us here at this table,  
strengthen our faith and fix our eyes on Jesus the babe of Bethlehem,  
the Morning Star who gladdens our hearts  
and guides our way. Amen.

## Blessing

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds,  
the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of Joseph and Mary,  
and the peace of the Christ-child be yours this Christmas;  
and the blessing of almighty  
God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
be with you now and always, Amen.

From the Church of England's *Common Worship*

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
O Come O Come Emmanuel	126	273	180	493
See Him Lying on a Bed of Straw	151	310	216	589
On Christmas Night	153	294		537
It came upon the midnight clear	144	303	205	345
Hark the Herald	159	301	202	211

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

## Other Ideas

If you are not livestreaming (if you are you will need a licence) you might want to play the following as interludes or music before and after the service:

*Child of the Poor/What Child is This (instrumental)*

Played by Chris Brunelle & Nichlas Schall who give their permission. You can find [here](#)

*Joy to the World* sung by Michael Eldridge which you can find [here](#).