worship notes
from the United Reformed Church

Christmas Eve Midnight Service 2026

The Revd Andy Braunston

Call to Worship

O come, faithful and unfaithful, joyful and despondent,
come to the manger and adore! **We come to worship.**

O come like the shepherds who left their flocks and drew near to gaze,
come to the manger and adore! **We come to worship.**

O come, like the angels, and sing with all the citizens of heaven,
come to the manger and adore! **We come to worship.**

O come and greet the One born for our salvation,
the Enfleshed Word of God, come to the manger and adore! **We come to worship.**

Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Grace

We come to adore You, O Most High.
In the darkness of this night, we seek Your light.
In the gloom and oppression of our world, we seek Your joy and freedom.

We come to adore You, O Christ.
In a context of contested power, we seek Your authority.
In a society of competing truths, we search for Your counsel.
In a world at war, we yearn for Your peace.
In the complexity of our lives, we hunger for the simplicity of Your rule.

As we seek, search, yearn, and hunger we are aware of our own failings;
our failure to love You, love others, and love ourselves.
So, we come not only to adore
but to ask for Your loving kindness which forgives
and which gives us time to turn our lives around.

We come to adore You, O Spirit,
You bring justice where hope is fading,
You call us to righteous living when we prefer to be unholy,
You bring forgiveness even when we prefer to remain in our sins.
So, forgive, guide, and inspire us,
that we may live in love from this time onward and forevermore. Amen

Prayer for Illumination

Purify our hearts and minds, O Most High,
that as we gather at the manger
to gaze on Jesus, the enfleshed Word,
we may hear the Spirit's call on our hearts,
to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives,
and continue to be Your own people. Amen.

Readings

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

Sermon Notes

Isaiah

Mary Mills SHCJ (JBC21) notes that the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are set 700 or so years before Christ, are focused on the southern kingdom of Judah, and deal with the threat Jerusalem and Judah faced from the Assyrian empire. The tone of these chapters is judgemental seeking to find divine purpose for the coming fate of the people. Isaiah deals with his contemporary realities by referring to sin and rebellion, and the judgement of invasion and exile. Shore-Goss and Melcher (CEJL) give more helpful historic background noting the passage is set in the 8th Century BCE in the context of a war where nations of Syria and Israel (the northern Jewish kingdom) had formed a coalition to resist the threat of Assyria. Judah, under the leadership of King Ahaz, and at Isaiah's urging, had not joined in this coalition. Israel and Syria put pressure on Judah to join and, in the end, Assyria crushed the revolt (hence those metaphors of battle in today's passage). The relief in the passage reflects the end of pressure from would be allies and a threatening superpower. Benjamin D Sommer (TJSB) observes that some rabbinic interpreters see the passage as being written in the past tense "for a child has been born" and so meaning, possibly, Hezekiah, whilst other Jews, and Christians, see the passage as prophecy of a future Davidic king. (Remember in Hebrew tenses are very tricky). John Goldingay (NIB) notes that Christians see, in this passage, words which speak to us of Christ despite the fact that it's not a passage the New Testament writers used to speak of Christ. R Coggins (OBC) comments that the passage reads like the poetry of a Psalm; it's poetic thanksgiving is part of what makes it resonate with readers now – and the way in which the Church uses it as a prophecy of Jesus. Coggins sees v6 "for a child has been born" as the climax of the passage and thinks it might have been used at an enthronement ceremony. The titles given may be ones from Egypt. Interpretation differs with Jewish readers seeing all this as a passage about King Hezekiah whilst Christians look to this passage as containing a message about Jesus. Mills, in looking at today's verses, observes they reprise some themes from chapter 8 (where the writer's own child is a sign of the Assyrian invasion) and a theme of walking in darkness. The image of the nation being multiplied comes from Genesis 22 and the language of harvest joy and looting in battle indicates hard labour is

needed before we get to the end of the walking in darkness. In v4 the images are of royalty – yoke, staff and rod – the political responsibilities of the king are heavy in the context of a superpower's threat. In contrast the kingly qualities of the child give hope in the gloom of the world as it is with a renewal of the Davidic dynasty. Goldingay notes that the author does not let calamity have the last word but, instead, promises that darkness, gloom, and anguish will be followed by glory, light and joy. Shore-Goss and Melcher comment that we use the passage as a prophecy of the peace that Christ will bring it's worth remembering that peace with nature is also something the Hebrew prophets taught. Justice is extended to creation. Contemporary warfare is a disaster both for nations and nature. We have a passage written when neighbours and superpowers vie an alliance, where to support one incurs the enmity of another but to stay neutral, whilst being faithful to God's prophet, might itself be dangerous. In the face of warfare, oppression, and terror, a new ruler is coming who will both bring and embody peace. For Christians this ruler is Christ, the long-promised Messiah – God's anointed one. Yet peace in the Bible is always more than the absence of war but involves creation itself. This year we've been admiring Ukrainian resilience where, through entrepreneurship, able diplomacy, and massive funding the country has survived, won back some territory and inflicted stunning losses on the Russians in terms of the dead and wounded and attacks on energy, naval, and computer infrastructure. Yet those attacks are catastrophic for the planet; as are the missiles fired nightly at Ukrainian towns and cities. Peace, when it comes, must also involve peace with the planet if humanity itself is to survive.

Titus

Titus, along with 1 and 2 Timothy are called "pastoral epistles" as they are concerned with imparting practical advice to new Christians. The consensus in the ancient Church was this epistle was written by Paul; since the 18th and 19th Century, however, it is thought to be written by an anonymous Christian writer in Paul's name. It was written to help a congregation struggling with its own identity and organisation. Margaret Y MacDonald (JBC21) notes that the letter is presented as being addressed to a pastor responsible for a church, or churches, in Crete. Titus plays a role in 2 Corinthians where he helps with a collection for famine relief and in Titus is named as Paul's "true child in our common faith" (1:4) Little is known about him, however. He is presented as comforting and encouraging Paul in 2 Cor and in Galatians we read he accompanied Paul to the Council in Jerusalem where Paul declared there was no need for him to be circumcised. (Gal 2:3) Maybe the exhortation in 2:15 not to let anyone look down on him relates to this episode. MacDonald thinks the practice of the day was to write in the style of another – clearly the letter was written to churches that saw Paul as authoritative. MacDonald comments that tonight's passage gives some of the strongest language in the NT concerning universal salvation "…the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all…" Salvation is nothing to do with glorious imperial appearances but with the appearance of God's grace in Christ. Ethics are allied in this passage with theology – how we live is a response to the appearance of God's grace. Grace changes us. Jennifer L Koosed (JANT) notes that the term "great God and saviour" comes from the Roman imperial religion and is reworked to ascribe divinity to Jesus. Redemption here refers to the Roman practice of manumission – setting a slave free. Matthew Skinner (NIB) comments that reputable

living becomes possible due to the salvation that God offers and is the appropriate response between the appearance of God's grace in Christ (v11) and the coming appearance of Christ in glory (v14). Our leaders attend to their appearances – think of Mr Wilson (who preferred cigars) always having his pipe to look like a man of the people, Mrs Thatcher's trademark handbag, Mr Johnson (who probably knew how to look smart) tousling his hair before going out to the cameras so he looked approachable, Mrs May's ill-fated attempt to dance at her party conference, or Mr Trump ensuring everything is covered with gold leaf to make him look classy. They were not unlike the ancient Roman emperors who announced the good news of their appearance. Instead, our author tells us of real good news – God has appeared bringing salvation (freedom) and will appear again bringing hope. The way we live in between these two appearances reflects how God's grace has changed us.

St Luke

The Gospel is the first part of a two-volume work Luke-Acts. The editor tells us that he collected his sources to make "an orderly account" and is not named anywhere. Amy-Jill Levine in JANT notes that Augustus who ruled between 27 BCE until 14 CE named himself "son of God", "saviour", and "father" – all titles the Gospel writers give Jesus. Contrary to what many of us have been taught, Jewish people at the time would not have looked down upon shepherds – the role is one used by Jewish kings to describe themselves after all. Michael Patella, OSB, (JBC21) notes the historical grounding (Augustus as emperor, Quirinius as governor) is how the author presents the events in Bethlehem in a world context. The original readers would have known the Romans saw Augustus' reign as the high point of the Roman peace – yet the author presents Jesus as the true bringer of peace who will supersede Roman rule. Jewish thought assumed the Messiah could come from Bethlehem and so the narrative takes us there. Whereas Matthew grounds Jesus in Bethlehem through a genealogy, Luke gets him there via the census. Scholars are aware of censuses taking place in various provinces but not one for the whole empire. Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until AD 6-7 and Herod died in AD 4 so there's some misremembered dates here. Patella comments that the Greek, translated as "inn" or "guest room" is *kataluma* means a building where animals are stabled on the ground floor with rooms on one or two floors above for family and guests. Incidentally, the same word, translated as "upper room" is used for the location of the Last Supper. There was no space in the upper room at the start of Jesus' life, yet space was made ready at the end. This eucharistic motif is also seen with "manger" being used three times in the passage; now Christ is laid in a feeding trough for animals, later he will feed his people with his own self. The angels interact with the Shepherds just as Gabriel had interacted with Zechariah and Mary. The shepherds have faith and rush to see what the Lord has done. Robert Shore-Goss and Sarah J Melcher (CEJL) note that there is a theme in Luke about margins and marginal people and site this story there on the margins. Jesus, they say, is an outsider at birth – born in a stable; later in Luke he is rejected by his hometown after his first sermon, he's clearly outside the Temple authorities given his scathing criticism of them, and seems to be an outsider from the Pharisees too. He dies as a political outsider, condemned by the state, and sent outside of Jerusalem to die. Even the date of his birth is unknown. Whereas history records many details about the birth of Augustus. "Jesus is a nobody, a

non-elite person, whose birth date and execution remain approximate dates." (p65) Since St Francis of Assisi, it has been the custom to create crib scenes – Francis used actual animals reminding us that animals were present at the appearance of good news. Instead of birth in a palace with grand attendants, Jesus is laid to rest in a feeding trough for cattle with animals to welcome him. In contrast to imperial rulers who pretend war is peace, Jesus will bring real peace, compassion, and good will not military might and conquest. Leonardo Boff is quoted "…if when looking at the manger you discover Jesus, poorly clad, almost naked, and you remember how many children are equally poorly clothed, and this situation wounds you to the bottom of your hearts, and you can share your surplus, and want to change this state of affairs right now; if when seeing the cow, the donkey, the sheep, the goats, the dogs, the camels and the elephant in the nativity, you think that the whole universe is also lit by the Divine Child and we are all part of the Great House of God…know that Jesus is born again and Christmas has come anew among you…." (p69)

Weaving the Threads

Like me, you might long for a Christmas where the theme of peace is not needed. Like me you might look at these verses and contrast the miliary might and the unreliable foreign alliances we wish were reliable and ponder that Isaiah's Jerusalem is not that different to our own world. We too, as a group of nations, wonder where we might find security with a superpower proving ever more unpredictable. We may not, like Isaiah, demand a go-it-alone policy depending only on God, but we may, like Luke see that the peace the world brings is always partial, always controlled by the victors, and always precarious. Roman might was many things but it wasn't peaceful. Into an occupied land Jesus was born; soon having to flee like so many today have to flee. God was found not at the palace but in the stable, not with the mighty but with the lowly, not with grand retainers, but with domestic animals. Boff's words make us wonder how we should react to the God we find in the hay; the writer to Titus tell us that we live between the initial appearance of God amongst us and the coming appearance. Our response is to live as changed people; not showy, powerful, or pretentious as so many of our leaders are, but, following Jesus to the edge and to find there, on the edge, the angels' song of peace.

JBC21	–	Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21st Century
CEJL	–	Canterbury Earth Justice Lectionary
TJSB	–	The Jewish Study Bible
NIB	–	New Interpreters Bible
OBC	–	Oxford Bible Commentary
JANT	–	Jewish Annotated New Testament

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God, the Most High,
who created the world and all that is in it,
in whom we live, move, and have our being.

We believe in Jesus, our redeemer,
glorious divinity in the frailty of human flesh,
born into poverty and exile,
lived, taught, healed, challenged, and loved,
put to death by the state,
raised by the Most High,
and who will return as ruler and judge:
our saviour and only hope.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
wind and breath of God,
fire of justice and compassion,
energy of God's people, who guides the Church,
our inspiration and liberation.

We believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
our source, guide, and goal, now and evermore, Amen.

Offertory

Giving at Christmas has a long history. In ancient Rome gifts were exchanged at the mid-winter Saturnalia holiday celebrated near the winter solstice. As Christianity became dominant various traditions of giving became apparent – some gave on 6th December – the feast of St Nicolas (who became in popular culture Father Christmas). Others gave on each of the 12 days of Christmas falling from Christmas Day to Epiphany on January 6th. Some gave just on Epiphany in memory of the wise ones who brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Holy Family. Now we generally give gifts on Christmas Day, though some European cultures give gifts on Christmas Eve. Hopefully we give because we want to express love and gratitude to those we love; hopefully we've not given so much that we've exhausted our own resources. When we give in church and to charities we also give as an expression of love and thanksgiving, knowing that our gifts make a difference. And so, we give.

O God of riches and poverty,
bless the gifts we give,
that they may be used in Your service,
showing love, making a difference,
and serving as a humble expression
of the love You have for Your creation. Amen

Intercessions

In the darkness of this night, we reach for the light of God's presence.
In the gloom of our world, we lift to God places where
joy is crushed, war rages, and justice is a but cruel dream,

knowing that whilst battles rage, peace is coming.

Let's pray.

Eternal Majesty,
we lift to You those, who like the Holy Family,
have to flee home and country to find safety,
who are on the move this night over sea and through desert,
manipulated by cruel gangs,
where both inns and countries say they are full.
Open our hearts that we may see Christ
in the poor, the migrant, the asylum seeker, and refugee.

pause

O God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Christ, Prince of peace,
we bring to You places of conflict, terror, war and division this night;
we pray for the people of Ukraine longing for peace and justice,
and the people of Russia hoping for change;
we pray for the people of Gaza and the West Bank
yearning for peace, justice, and the right to flourish,
and the people of Israel seeking security and safety.
We remember the people of Iran,
resilient in the face of onslaught and internal oppression, waiting for better days.
We pray for where war rages, peace is but a dream, and oppression is normal.
Open our minds, that we may follow Your ways of peace.

pause

O God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Most Holy Spirit,
You journey with us as we dance with joy, and as we weep with sadness.
Bless those this night who near the end, comfort those who wait with them.
Bless too those who rejoice this night,
the excitement of children, the comfort of adults,
the familiarity of friends and family,
that the love shared this Christmas,
will guide our paths into the new year.

pause

O God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Eternal Trinity of love,
hear our prayers as we pray as Jesus taught…Our Father…

Holy Communion

May God be with you!
And also with you!
Lift up your hearts!
We lift them up to God!
Let us give thanks to Almighty God!
It is right to give God our thanks and praise!

Loving, all-powerful and ever-living God,
we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Tonight You fill our hearts with joy
as we recognise in Christ the revelation of your love.
No eye can see his glory as our God
yet now he is seen as one like us.
Christ is your Son before all ages,
yet now he is born in time.
He has come to lift up all things to himself,
to restore unity to creation
and to lead us all from exile into your Realm.

And so with all the choirs of angels in heaven,
we proclaim your glory and join in their unending hymn of praise:

(adapted from the Roman Missal)

Jesus, we praise You and give You thanks,
because you emptied Yourself of power,
and became foolishness for our sake;
for we celebrate the night when
You were delivered as one of us,
a baby needy and naked,
wrapped in a woman's blood,
born into poverty and exile,
to proclaim good news to the poor,
and to let the broken victims go free.

We remember the night when,
gathered with your friends
You took bread and having blessed it, broke it and said:

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

In the same way when the Supper was finished,
you took the cup filled with wine, blessed it and said:

"Take this all of you and drink from it,
for this is the cup of my blood,
the blood of the new and everlasting covenant,
which will be shed for you.
Do this in memory of me."

Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith.....

Christ has died! Christ is Risen! Christ will come again!

Come now dearest Spirit of our God,
embrace us with Your comfortable power,
brood over these bodily things that they may be, for us,
the communion of the body and blood of Christ.
And brood over us and make us one body in Christ.
As Mary's body was broken for him, and her blood shed,
so may we show forth His brokenness for the life of the world
and may creation be made whole through
the new birth in His blood.

Therefore, with the woman who gave You birth,
with the women who befriended You and fed you,
the woman who anointed You for death,
the women who met You risen from the tomb,
and with all Your lovers, women and men,
throughout the ages, we praise You as we realise that:

Through You, with You, in You,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
all glory and honour belongs to the Most High,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Adapted from All Desires Known
© 1988 Janet Morley & The Movement for the Ordination of Women

Post Communion Prayer

O Most High,
on this holy night You have shown us once again
the coming of Jesus Christ, the Enfleshed Word.
Strengthen our faith and keep our eyes fixed on him,
until the new day breaks
and Christ the Morning Star shines in our hearts,
though the power of the Holy Spirit.
To Christ be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

adapted from the Church of England's Common Worship

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 God almighty,

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
or
Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word, and Enlivening Wind

be among you and remain with you always.