

# A month of Sundays December 2023



Preston Ribble Circuit

Ministry Team

# Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023

## A Gathering Prayer

Bright, shining God, shimmering in the darkness of winter,  
we approach you today with your light in our hearts.

We wait for you, we watch for you,  
just as the watchmen await the first signs of morning.

Walk with us throughout Advent,  
and light our feet as we walk perhaps a little unsteadily  
towards the birth of the 'light of the world'.

**Amen.**

## Bible reading: Mark 13:24-37

<sup>24</sup> "But in those days, following that distress,

"the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;

<sup>25</sup> the stars will fall from the sky,  
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

<sup>26</sup> "At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in  
clouds with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> And he will send his  
angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends  
of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

<sup>28</sup> "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs  
get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is  
near. <sup>29</sup> Even so, when you see these things happening, you  
know that it is near, right at the door. <sup>30</sup> Truly I tell you, this  
generation will certainly not pass away until all these things  
have happened. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my  
words will never pass away.

## The Day and Hour Unknown

<sup>32</sup> "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the  
angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Be on

guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. <sup>34</sup> It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

<sup>35</sup> "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. <sup>36</sup> If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. <sup>37</sup> What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

## **Hymn Stf 741: We pray until the hour**

- 1 We pray until the hour,  
that awesome hour unknown,  
when, robed in majesty and power,  
you shall from heaven come down.
- 2 O Christ our souls prepare  
for that tremendous day,  
and fill us now with watchful care,  
and stir us up to pray.
- 3 At last may we be found  
obedient to your word,  
attentive to the judgement sound,  
and looking for our Lord!
- 4 To those who shall endure,  
Christ gives his promised rest,  
we watch each moment to secure  
our place among the blest.

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)  
adapted by Norman Wallwork (b.1946)  
based on *Thou judge of quick and dead.* .

## **Prayer of intercession**

For those who have waited for years for the dawn, Lord we pray.

For those for whom hope seems dim, Lord we pray.

For those whose morning brought the unexpected, Lord we pray.

For those struggling to adjust to new realities, Lord we pray.

For those whose fires have grown dim, Lord we pray.

For those who are ignoring the signs of the times, Lord we pray.

For those who are struggling to keep awake, Lord we pray.

**Amen.**

## **Reflection**

Western society is immersed in immediacy. It doesn't like to wait. Many of us no longer watch one episode of our favourite TV drama per week; we binge watch the whole series. We don't save up for expensive household items; we buy them now on credit. But might waiting for something increase its value? When it is quick and easy, do we cease to value it as much? We want cheap clothes quickly, and to do so we devalue the lives of the people who make them. Have we forgotten how to understand the value of something? Have we forgotten how to wait?

And if this is true of our everyday lives, how much more difficult does it make waiting for Jesus to return? Do we even remember in our day-to-day living that Jesus asks us to wait for him, and to live in the assumption that it might be tomorrow? If we did remember, each and every day, that we are waiting – and waiting for something as invaluable as Christ – what difference might it make to how we look at things?

There is a joy and excitement to be had in waiting. Remember the days of waiting by your letterbox for a long-anticipated letter? Now we buy something online and we are told precisely when it will turn up: 'your delivery is two stops away' the message says. Where's the fun in that? If we could return to the frisson of anticipation that waiting for a parcel brings, perhaps there's a chance that we would understand once more the thrill of the wait when we contemplate Jesus' return.

## **A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Thank you, Father God, for your abundant blessings:  
for never giving up on us;  
for giving us all we need to live and serve you;  
for peace and stability in this unstable and conflicted world;  
for the security we have in you and in your guiding word;  
for keeping us strong in faith and hope in a world where  
Jesus is pushed to the sidelines and ignored by many.

**Thank you, Father, for the riches of your grace,  
and the glory that is yet to come.**

**Amen.**

## **Say the Lord's Prayer**

### **A sending out prayer**

Lord, we begin our Advent,  
waiting for you with love and patience.  
Help us to remember that you will return for us  
and for those yet to know you.  
Help us to be patient and alert,  
but help us also to be doing and serving  
and building your kingdom.  
Your kingdom come on earth,  
**as it is in heaven.**

**Amen.**



# Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> December 2023

## Call to worship

Bring your thoughts, bring your feelings,  
bring your busyness, bring your chaos,  
bring your calm, bring your worries,  
bring your hopes and your fears.  
Bring it all here – and put it all down for a while...  
and let the light of God fill the space.

## Bible reading: Mark 1:1-8

### John the Baptist Prepares the Way

**1** The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”—

**3** “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”

**4** And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **6** John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

## Reflection

Christmas is definitely the season for a movie. What's your favourite? Perhaps it's the mighty *Elf*? Or the classic *It's a Wonderful Life*? Or maybe it's the best retelling of a Charles Dickens' classic: *The Muppet Christmas Carol*? *Home Alone*? Or a cheesy romance?

There's something very reassuring about a favourite Christmas movie – often so familiar that you can be assured there are no nasty shocks or surprises to come, and you can probably recite most of the script. The 'what's your favourite Christmas movie?' question is one piece of a jigsaw that for many of us is our Christmas. Other pieces include: the food, relatives, the tree, carols, nativity plays, holly, and all the family rituals. The Christmas story itself is also something of a jigsaw where the pieces include: images of stars, angels, mangers, kings, shepherds – so many bits and pieces that make up Christmas.

So, it can be disconcerting when we bump into his week's Gospel reading. The story of a man in the desert baptizing people perhaps isn't one of the pieces. Does it even belong in our Christmas countdown? Well, Mark doesn't start his Gospel with Jesus' birth; indeed, he doesn't mention it at all. But this is where he begins Jesus' story. He tells us something that nativity plays generally do not. He tells us that this story of Jesus' is about the whole of creation standing on the brink of a total and radical transformation, a new beginning with God through the transforming presence of Jesus.

There are so many different pieces that come together to make our Christmas. When the big day arrives, the pieces in view may be those that relate to the success of our Christmas Day as human and family activity. Don't lose sight of the bigger



picture, beyond the table and the stable: all this is about the arrival of a man who was God. Yes, born in a stable, but a man who will baptize with the Holy Spirit so that we may be transformed, so that all creation can be restored, so that through him we can find a true and transformed life with God our maker. That is Christmas in context.

## **Hymn StF**

- 1 Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,  
whose trust, ever childlike, no cares could destroy,  
be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,  
your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.
  
- 2 Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,  
whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,  
be there at our labours, and give us, we pray,  
your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.
  
- 3 Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,  
your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,  
be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,  
your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.
  
- 4 Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,  
whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,  
be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,  
your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.

Jan Struther (Joyce Placzek) (1901–1953)

## **A prayer of confession**

Forgive us, Lord, for focusing on our problems and not looking beyond them to you and the bigger picture. We can become frustrated and impatient when we are blind to, or unsure of, the way ahead. And often we take things into our own hands instead of waiting for your perfect timing.

Forgive us for getting wrapped up in the commercialism of Christmas, instead of feasting our eyes on the Messiah, heaven's true gift of Christmas.

Lord God, we're sorry.

John was persistent and lived his message of Jesus.

Help us to humble ourselves

and to live out your good news today. Amen.

## **Prayer of intercession**

We pray...

For those lost in valleys.

**May they be lifted up.**

For those stuck in the heights.

**May they be helped down.**

For those in barren places.

**May they find shelter.**

For those in rough places.

**May they hear eternal words.**

For those seeking forgiveness.

**May they find it.**

For those seeking apology.

**May they hear it.**

For those waiting for a long time.

**May they find patience in your patience.**

For those waiting for renewal.

**May there be springs of growth.**

**Amen.**

# Say the Lord's Prayer

## A sending out prayer

Lord, when we feel far from you,

**help us to see the whole picture.**

When we struggle to see your hand in our lives,

**help us to see the whole picture.**

When we are stuck and need to move forwards,

**help us to see the whole picture.**

When we can't see anything except the situation right in front of us,

**help us to see the whole picture. Amen.**

# Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> December 2023

## A gathering prayer

Father God, thank you for your presence here today.  
Thank you that you speak to us through our worship.  
Thank you that you speak to us through your Word.  
Thank you that you speak to us through each other.  
Help us to listen to your voice as we worship.  
Help us to listen to your voice as Scripture is read.  
Help us to listen to your voice as we seek your truth.  
**Amen.**

## Hymn Stf 172: Hills of the north, rejoice

- 1 Hills of the north, rejoice,  
river and mountain-spring,  
hark to the advent voice ;  
valley and lowland, sing.  
Christ comes in righteousness and love,  
he brings salvation from above.
  
- 2 Isles of the southern seas,  
sing to the listening earth ;  
carry on every breeze  
hope of a world's new birth :  
in Christ shall all be made anew ;  
his word is sure, his promise true.
  
- 3 Lands of the east, arise !  
He is your brightest morn ;  
greet him with joyous eyes,  
let praise his path adorn :  
your seers have longed to know their Lord ;  
to you he comes, the final Word.

4 Shores of the utmost west,  
lands of the setting sun,  
welcome the heavenly guest  
in whom the dawn has come :  
he brings a never-ending light,  
who triumphed o'er our darkest night.

5 Shout, as you journey on ;  
songs be in every mouth !  
Lo, from the north they come,  
from east and west and south :  
in Jesus all shall find their rest,  
in him the universe be blest.

Charles Ernest Oakley (1832–1865) and Editors of *English Praise*, 1975

## **A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Something good lies just around the corner.  
We can't see it yet, but we know it's good.  
Excitement is mounting.  
We thank you for what and who is to come.  
We thank you for what we have now.  
You bless us day by day.  
Even when we're sad, we can praise you.  
You catch our tears; you turn negatives into positives;  
you turn our dark times into light and make us laugh again,  
clothing us in garments of praise.  
You make the sun shine and flowers bloom.  
Something good lies just around the corner.  
We can't see it yet, but we give thanks –  
for we know it's good. **Amen.**

## **Say the Lord's Prayer**

## **Bible reading: John 1:6-28**

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

<sup>9</sup> The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup> (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup> Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

### **John the Baptist Denies Being the Messiah**

<sup>19</sup> Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. <sup>20</sup> He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

<sup>21</sup> They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

<sup>22</sup> Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

<sup>23</sup> John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

<sup>24</sup> Now the Pharisees who had been sent <sup>25</sup> questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

<sup>26</sup> “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. <sup>27</sup> He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

<sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

## **Reflection**

Have you ever been in the spotlight? Perhaps in a school production, or in a local amateur dramatics’ society, or even in church, you literally found yourself under a big bright light – the spotlight. If so, you probably remember the ferocity of that light. Were you nervous or completely confident? Perhaps you felt under a spotlight during a time when you were under close scrutiny – doing a presentation, or a job interview? This would have been a metaphorical light – but you know that people are watching and listening to you.

Being in the spotlight inevitably means that, in some way, you are the centre of attention. In the examples just given, there surely has to be some welcome or acceptance of that attention – you knew it would happen! But what if the spotlight falls on

you unasked; if suddenly and unexpectedly, you are scrutinised, watched, closely examined? Has this ever happened to you because of your faith? If so, a better question might be: how do you feel about the spotlight?

In this week's Gospel reading, John finds himself firmly in the spotlight. His actions by the river Jordan had attracted attention. The religious authorities had noticed what he was doing and wanted to shine a light on him. Perhaps they just wanted to see more clearly. Perhaps they wanted to catch him out and expose him. It's not completely clear in the reading. What is clear, however, is that he is suddenly the focus of attention and needs to answer questions about who he is and what he's up to. He has a very specific response to this scrutiny. He shifts the spotlight from himself and his activity, and onto Jesus. His answers point his listeners elsewhere to the one who is coming after him. He redirects and moves the conversation towards Jesus. He knows the one coming next will not just be in the light, but will be the light.

When the spotlight falls on us, can we do the same?

## **Prayers of intercession**

We pray today for all who are downtrodden, all who are oppressed, all who know the heavy hand of marginalisation on them. God, we turn to you, remembering the words of Mary, praying that you will lift up the lowly, you will raise the voice of justice, and you will scatter oppression. May all who are oppressed be set free.

We ask this, in joy and gratitude.

In your name we pray.

We pray that we might find rhythms of life that sustain us here. Rhythms for cultivating and renewing the earth; human community; jus-tice; and creativity.

We ask this, in joy and gratitude.

In your name we pray.

**Amen.**



## **A sending out prayer**

Lord, help us to reflect you at work.

Help us to reflect you at school.

Help us to reflect you at home.

Help us to reflect you when we're out.

Help us to reflect you with our friends.

Help us to reflect you to our neighbours.

Shine your light so all may see your love this Christmas.

**Amen.**

# Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> December 2023

## Call to worship

Lay aside your thoughts about cooking the turkey tomorrow.  
Lay aside any worries about whether you've got everything.  
Lay aside concerns about visitors or visits.

And instead...

fill your mind with the story of the stable,  
feel the peace the Christ child brings,  
experience the joy of heaven at the birth of God's Son,  
and open your heart to the Lord.

## Bible reading: Luke 1:26-38

### The Birth of Jesus Foretold

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.”

<sup>38</sup> “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

## **Reflection**

What does the word risk mean to you? It’s a word common in the business and financial worlds. Forbes magazine claims that: ‘If you are brave enough to take risks in uncharted waters, you are already at a competitive advantage.’ Risk, it seems, is the prerequisite for making a fortune.

The word may also resonate personally, bringing to mind moments in your life when you stepped away from your comfort zone – a new job or relationship, perhaps. Maybe thinking about risk makes you feel a bit uncomfortable, especially if it hasn’t always gone to plan. It wouldn’t be a risk if it always did! Or maybe your encounter with risk is more at the level of a board game that you’re looking forward to playing – and winning – over the Christmas period, conquering the world from the kitchen table.

Whatever the context, to open yourself to risk is to accept a future that you can’t fully control, and possibly to experience something unanticipated or unknown. Mary’s encounter with the angel and the risk she subsequently takes on, invites her into a future that would have been completely unanticipated and unknown, not least the experience of pregnancy, with its accompanying challenges. This is later followed by forced travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem during the final weeks of her pregnancy, and childbirth in a barn. The travel may have happened anyway, but the rest is all among the consequences of saying ‘Yes’ to God’s plan.

If we stand back a little from such a familiar story, such an integral part of Christmas Eve, we can perhaps see the immense risk Mary took. Her courage and willingness to do this is at the heart of the story. It tells us something about the even bigger story (of Jesus) that will follow: he will invite all of us to take a risk, to follow him, to give our life to his service, to take a risk in loving him and others 'as he loved us'. It's a risk that the world might say has no obvious return. But we know that taking a risk in faith is the only thing in our lives that will give us an eternal and lasting return.

## **Prayer of thanksgiving**

Father, how can we thank you enough for your Christmas gift to us? We give thanks as labour pains intensify, heralding Jesus' birth, the empty cradle soon to be filled and overflowing with love – a love that touches, convicts, renews and blesses. We thank you for the joy that fills us as we wait with baited breath to celebrate our Saviour. We give thanks for your loving glory which comes down this Christmas time. **Amen.**

## **Hymn StF 186: Tell out, my soul**

- 1 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!  
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;  
tender to me the promise of his word;  
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.
- 2 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!  
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;  
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;  
his holy name — the Lord, the Mighty One.

3 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!  
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;  
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,  
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

4 Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!  
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.  
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord  
to children's children and for evermore!

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926)  
Based on the *Magnificat*

## **A prayer of intercession**

We pray today for those who feel far from themselves and others. We pray that this Advent season might, in the midst of demand, provide soft nights and ease, so that people can return to themselves, knowing you, too, are always in the heart, and always wait for us with kindness.

**We ask this, in the name of all that is good.**

We remember today all who have not given their consent, but whose lives and bodies and integrity are taken for granted. For them, we pray for justice, reparation and truth.

**We ask this, in the name of all that is good.**

Today we remember that God surprised us by coming among us through the 'Yes' of Mary. Let us always be open to the surprise of finding God in unexpected places.

**We ask this, in the name of all that is good.**

**Amen.**

## **Say the Lord's Prayer**

## **A sending out prayer**

'Our Lord, we will sing of your love forever.  
Everyone yet to be born will hear us praise your faithfulness.  
We will tell them, "God's love can always be trusted,  
God's faithfulness lasts as long as the heavens."  
(Psalm 89:1-2, based on CEV)

Lord, let us feel your steadfast love,  
and sing your praises this Christmas time.  
Let us proclaim to our friends and family how great you are.  
Let us see the power of the baby in the cradle.  
Let us say 'Yes, let it be' this Christmas time. Amen.

# **Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> December 2023**

## **Christmas Day**

### **A prayer of approach**

Come one and all,  
dressed in the joy of the Lord.  
Praise the light of salvation that  
God has revealed to us in Jesus.  
Come, see, listen and hear.  
**Amen.**

### **Say the Lord's Prayer**

### **Bible reading: Luke 2:1-20**

#### **The Birth of Jesus**

**2** In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And everyone went to their own town to register.

<sup>4</sup> So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup> He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around

them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

## **A prayer of adoration**

Abba Father, God of all power and wisdom,  
your glory shines in all creation.

You knew and loved us long before we came to be,  
and your love surrounds us now.

**We bow before you in joyous exultation.**

Jesus, Son of the Most High and King of kings,  
you were born into a lowly cradle;  
love’s heart personified from cradle to cross  
and beyond to your kingdom throne.

**We bow before you in joyous exultation.**



Holy Spirit, moving upon the earth  
communicating and revealing God's wisdom, love and power,  
you open hearts to receive and transform lives.

**Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
we bow before you in joyous exultation.  
Amen.**

## Hymn

*Come and join the celebration, it's a very special day  
come and share our jubilation, there's a new King born  
today!*

1 See the shepherds hurry down to Bethlehem,  
gaze in wonder at the Son of God who lay before them:  
*Come and join the celebration, it's a very special day  
come and share our jubilation, there's a new King born  
today!*

2 Wise men journey, led to worship by a star,  
kneel in homage, bringing precious gifts from lands afar, so,  
*Come and join the celebration, it's a very special day  
come and share our jubilation, there's a new King born  
today!*

3 'God is with us,' round the world the message bring,  
he is with us, 'Welcome,' all the bells on earth are pealing:  
*Come and join the celebration, it's a very special day  
come and share our jubilation, there's a new King born  
today!*

Valerie Collison (b.1933)

## A sending out prayer

Like Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem,  
be with us as we journey from place to place this Christmas,  
and as we journey in our hearts towards you.

Like the stable that became a place of warmth and safety,  
be with us as we enjoy the warmth of others' company,  
and as we open our hearts to you.

Like the shepherds who responded with joy and excitement,  
be with us in all the excitement of Christmas,  
and fill our hearts with excitement for you.

Like the baby in the manger, bringing hope to all,  
Encourage us to look for hope this Christmas,  
and help us to bring hope and light to others.  
**Amen.**

**Happy Christmas!**

# Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023

## Call to worship

Praise the Lord!

Praise him, sun and moon.

Praise him, shining stars.

Praise him, highest heavens and running waters.

Let's praise the name of the Lord from all the earth!

## Bible reading: Luke 2:22-40

### Jesus Presented in the Temple

<sup>22</sup> When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

<sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

<sup>29</sup> "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation,

<sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel."

<sup>33</sup> The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his

mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, <sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. <sup>38</sup> Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

<sup>39</sup> When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

## **Say the Lord’s Prayer**

### **Hymn StF 216: See him lying on a bed of straw**

- 1 See him lying on a bed of straw ;  
draughty stable with an open door,  
Mary cradling the babe she bore ;  
the Prince of Glory is his name :  
*O now carry me to Bethlehem  
to see the Lord of love again ;  
just as poor as was the stable then,  
the Prince of Glory when he came.*
- 2 Star of silver, sweep across the skies,  
show where Jesus in the manger lies ;  
shepherds, swiftly from your stupor rise  
to see the Saviour of the world :

*O now carry me to Bethlehem  
to see the Lord of love again ;  
just as poor as was the stable then,  
the Prince of Glory when he came.*

- 3 Angels, sing again the song you sang,  
sing the story of God's gracious plan ;  
sing that Bethl'em's little baby can  
be the Saviour of us all :

*O now carry me to Bethlehem  
to see the Lord of love again ;  
just as poor as was the stable then,  
the Prince of Glory when he came.*

- 4 Mine are riches from your poverty,  
from your innocence, eternity ;  
mine, forgiveness by your death for me ;  
child of sorrow for my joy :

*O now carry me to Bethlehem  
to see the Lord of love again ;  
just as poor as was the stable then,  
the Prince of Glory when he came.*

Michael Perry (1942–1996)

## **Reflection**

In some cultures and faiths, and in our own in much earlier centuries, the wisdom of our elders and our ancestors was prized and held in high esteem. We might think of the desert mothers and fathers, of tribal matriarchs and patriarchs, or wise women and men. We might ask our own mothers or grandmothers for a favoured recipe or remedy, or seek help or advice from a favourite aunt or uncle. Many of us remember a time before Google!

In such a time, a little over 2000 years ago in a very busy Temple in Jerusalem, which may have been thronging with

parents presenting their newborns, two very old people spoke words that resonated with Mary, enough for her to hear and remember them. Words of wisdom and insight. At the end of the passage, we hear Jesus described as being filled with wisdom. And, in the following verses (not part of this week's reading), we see Jesus, aged just 12, speaking in the Temple with wisdom and understanding. People much older than he was, sat and listened. He wasn't told to be quiet because they recognised he had something to say.

Do we sometimes throw the baby out with the bathwater, refusing to our detriment to listen to nuggets of gold just because of the speaker's age – too young, or too old? Of course, that is not to deny that we may be faced by a precocious child or a preachy pensioner, neither of whom have anything of note to share beyond their ego. But do we sometimes dismiss young people, thinking they can't possibly know much when they are yet to experience adult life? Do we dismiss older people, as if they were born old and didn't live their life as we are living ours? Or do we value and listen to generations other than our own, and give respect to what they have to say?

## **Prayers of Intercession**

Today we honour Simeon and Anna. Old, both, they had a light that sustained them. They both held strongly to what they knew they hoped for. May we – people of all ages – be held together by what sustains us. Whether seven or seventy, may we know what is most important.

**God in your mercy, hear us.**

Today we honour all shapes of families. Families by choice, families by adoption, families by birth, families in grief, families in multiple homes, families in negotiation, families in care, families in support. In all shapes of family, may we find words of love and kindness.

**God in your mercy, hear us.**

Today we pray for people who are ignored because of their age. In an era where youth and beauty are praised, we have so often ignored wisdom, experience, longstanding faithfulness and perspective. For all who have felt overlooked, for all who have love and wisdom to share, we pray.

**God in your mercy, hear us.**

## **A sending out prayer**

Lord, the excitement of Christmas Day is over,  
but Christmas is never over because you are with us – always.  
Help us to live this coming week,  
indeed, the coming year,  
with the same excitement as we had last week.

**Amen.**