

Daily Devotions from the United Reformed Church Midnight Communion Service for Christmas Eve



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The Rev'd Simon Walkling

Opening Music: *Joy to the World* (Isaac Watts) sung by Pentatonix

Introduction

Welcome to our Christmas Eve midnight communion. We pause to mark God breaking into history in the person of Jesus. We celebrate God coming into our lives now. Whatever time you join this service, this moment is made special by God's presence. Please have to hand bread and wine or other symbols for communion that we will share together as part of our worship.

The picture beside me is of a stable with a star above it. If you look at it slightly differently, it's three crosses. For me it links Christmas to Easter and reminds us that God bridges the gap between heaven and earth by coming as one of us, and by making for us a way through death to life to be gathered up in the life of God.

Call To Worship

Hark, hark, the wise eternal word, like a weak infant cries! In form of servant is the Lord, and God in cradle lies, **come let us adore Him!**

Hymn *On Christmas Night (Sussex Carol)*

English traditional after Luke Wadding (d.1686)

On Christmas night
all Christians sing,
to hear the news the angels bring,
on Christmas night
all Christians sing,
to hear the news the angels bring,
news of great joy,
news of great mirth,
news of our merciful King's birth.

2 Then why should men
on earth be so sad,
since our Redeemer
made us glad,
then why should men
on earth be so sad,
since our Redeemer made us glad,
when from our sin he set us free,
all for to gain our liberty?

3 When sin departs before his grace,
then life and health
come in its place;
when sin departs
before his grace,
then life and health
come in its place;
angels and men with joy may sing,
all for to see the new-born King.

4 All out of darkness we have light,
which made the angels
sing this night:
all out of darkness
we have light,
which made the angels
sing this night;
'Glory to God, and peace to me,
Now and forever more, Amen!'

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Declaration of Forgiveness

Creator God, you make time, you took the risk of making time and matter and are present in each unfolding moment, we make time to focus on your presence with us.

Saving God, you risked rejection by coming as one of us, coming in the pain of birth, making a way through suffering and death, we make space in this day to welcome you into our lives once again.

Sustaining God, you gave us life and offer us new life: forgive us and give us a new beginning restore our relationship with you and give us courage to sort our relationships with each other.

So we centre ourselves with you, we breathe out the used air of old solutions and breathe in Spirit of faith. Breathe out stale air of cynicism and apathy, breathe in Spirit of love. Breathe out polluted air of tired and unjust world, breathe in Spirit of hope.

Listen everyone and hear the good news, Jesus says, 'Take heart, your sins are forgiven.' He also says, 'Follow me!' May it be so, Amen.

Reflection 1

I wonder if you have things around you that mark this Christmas season? A tree as a symbol of life in the dead of winter. Lights as a sign of hope in the darkness. Cards bringing news from people who care about us. In front of me, I have three nativity sets that help me glimpse something of Christmas.

The first isn't really a set. It's a figure of pregnant Mary, carved out of olive wood, bought at the Christmas House carvers in Bethlehem, from Jack who took time to tell us something of what it means to be a Christian in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. It reminds me of what it took for Mary to say, 'Yes!' to God. Then there is another olive wood nativity with a stable, a star, a baby in the manger, and a shepherd with some sheep. There are wise men heading toward the stable, but their way is barred by a representation of the security barrier, the eight-meter-high wall that separates Israel from Palestinian areas. It's a reminder to me that just as Jesus came into a divided world, with life



shaped by political power, the same is true today and we need to welcome him now.



The third nativity is made of felt. It depicts Jesus in a manger with Mary and Joseph watching over him and a sheep by the side. They aren't in a stable, but a cave, similar to the ones you visit if you go to the shepherds' fields outside Bethlehem. It was

made by the L'Arche community in Bethlehem where differently abled people live and work together. For me, it's a reminder about how much our thinking is conditioned by culture, tradition and habit. Where the mention of a manger leads us to think of a stable rather than a cave, and disabling assumptions can lead us to limit other people, when we all have immeasurable worth to God.

So let's ponder in our hearts as we hear about Mary and Joseph, pushed around by bureaucracy, far from home, finding no room, but welcoming Jesus into the world. Let's prepare to do that in prayer: God who spoke the creative word, and came in Jesus the living Word, who became flesh and dwelt among us: help us to listen for your Word alive for us now through the help of your Holy Spirit. Amen

Reading *St Luke 2:1-7*

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be

registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Hymn *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*
Edmund Hamilton Sears (1810-1876) (alt.)

It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending
near the earth
to touch their harps of gold:
'Peace on the earth,
good will to you
from heaven's all-gracious King!'
The world in solemn stillness lay
to hear the angels sing.

2 Still through the cloven
skies they come
with peaceful wings unfurled;
and still their heavenly music floats
o'er all the weary world;
above its sad and lowly plains
they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o'er its Babel-sounds
the blessed angels sing.

3 But with the woes of
sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the angel-strain have
rolled
two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.

4 For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet bards foretold,
when, with the ever-circling years,
comes round the Age of Gold,
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendours fling,
and the whole world
give back the song
which now the angels sing.

Reflection 2

I'd like to start our reflections with thinking how Joseph may have felt that first Christmas night, talking to the new baby. I have reworked

something I used after our first child was born. I don't think all the ideas were original, but I can't trace where they came from. What a world to come into, eh?

Hustle and bustle. People away from home, answering questions, being pushed from official to official. Everyone shouting to be heard. Quieter now in the starlight. How do you like it after four hours? It'll be alright. I had a feeling you would come now. And we had everything arranged for you back home. I made you a little bed, planed smooth with no splinters. I carved a lamb in the head-board. You'll see when we get home to Nazareth. You'll like it. Well I hope so, I wouldn't like you to think I wanted you to spend your first night in this old feeding trough.

One of the legs is wobbly, so at least it rocks. But that's nails for you, see. That should have been jointed, good and proper. Never trust nails son.

A little care is needed, that's all. And I hope I can take care of you. Perhaps you will take after me and be a carpenter. Perhaps you will take after your Father and my Father in heaven and be loving, forgiving, and challenging. You see the angel told me in my dream that you are going to save your people from their sins... which does seem a lot to ask looking at you now.

But I'm different just because you're here, you make me see the world in a new light. Maybe this is making me see sins in a new light too. I was going to dump Mary because of the disgrace, but holding you makes me know it was right to keep hold of her. I want to make everything alright for you, and my dream makes me think that God wants it to be alright for everyone.

Such reflections can help us engage with the brief verses in Luke in a different way, by imagining the human story in the midst of God's unfolding purpose. It mixes Luke's account with what Mathew

describes. Luke focuses in on Mary. Matthew explains why Joseph stuck by her. These kind of reflections help us feel our way into the meaning as well as thinking about the content. We could see parallels here with our family Christmas traditions building a pattern that evokes past memories and present feelings. Sharing in this worship may prompt thoughts of previous Christmas Eve communions and how they have been different in recent years. We can harness such feelings to feel that God is close this year at this time. The closeness of God now, as these words connect us, can help us get to the heart of Christmas – that God is with us.

But Luke is about more than feelings. Luke wants to root Jesus birth in events in history, in the political context of the Roman empire. Luke wants us to understand these events in relation to Messianic hopes connected to David. This is God breaking into history to bring life and light, love and hope, to bring new life through a new life. So whatever is going on in our world at the moment, this is about God breaking in to our story, to give us new life and renew our hope.

One of our family traditions in my teenage years, was that we could open one present when we got back from the Christmas Eve midnight communion. It was marking that Christmas Day had already begun and it was a taster of the other presents that would be given and received after we had slept / when the sun had come up / in the morning. We are going to share communion. In bread and wine we remember that God is with us, here and now. In doing this in remembrance of Jesus, we remember his birth and life, his dying and rising, and brings us into communion with God and the meaning of it becomes real for us now. It is a sign of what is already true, but it is a taste of what is yet to come, when God's rule will mean that everyone can find room and everyone will have enough, when there will be glory to God in highest heaven and peace on earth.

Hymn *Silent Night*

Fr Joseph Mohr, Elisabeth Kruckenhauser tr by Emily Elliott

Silent night, holy night!

All is calm, all is bright.

Round yon Virgin,

Mother and Child.

Holy infant so tender and mild,

Sleep in heavenly peace,

Sleep in heavenly peace

2: Silent night, holy night!

Shepherds quake at the sight.

Glories stream

from heaven afar

Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,

Christ the Saviour is born!

Christ the Saviour is born

3: Silent night, holy night! Son of God love's pure light.

Radiant beams from Thy holy face with dawn of redeeming grace,

Jesus Lord, at Thy birth! Jesus Lord, at Thy birth

Reflection 3

Followers of Jesus have always reflected on Jesus life and drawn out it's meaning to show how God is working to forgive us, make us whole and reconcile the world. We connect remembering Jesus, to present experience, to future hope. The writer to the Hebrews does this by drawing on links with the prophets and the priests in the temple. Jesus is described as a Son, the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being. It helps lead us on from our reflecting on Joseph holding the baby to Jesus ruling with God. It links our communion as a symbolic shared meal now, with the future feast of God's Kingdom.

Reading *Hebrews 1:1-4*

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very

being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Hymn *O Little Town Of Bethlehem*
Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) (alt.)

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see you lie!
Above your deep
and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by;
yet in your streets is shining
the everlasting Light;
the hopes & fears of all the years
are met in you tonight.

2 O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
and peace to all on earth.
For Christ is born of Mary;
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep,
the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.

3 How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will
receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

4 O holy Child
of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in;
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel.

Holy Communion

Giving God, you gave yourself to us in Jesus and continue to equip us with the gifts of your Holy Spirit. We offer the symbols we have to share in communion and pray that you will use them to make your presence real for us now. We offer you our time and talents and the

money we give to our churches and pray that you will use them to make your presence known in the world. Amen

Bethlehem means 'House of Bread' so as we remember Jesus born in Bethlehem we are fed by Jesus the Bread of life. He says, 'Anyone who comes to me, I will not turn away.' As we remember Jesus the Son of God and Son of Man, we give thanks that we are children of God, joint heirs with Christ of God's promises.

As the pattern for what we do we remember what Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also, after supper he took the cup and gave it to his disciples saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.' Paul adds, as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you show forth the Lord's death until he comes.

So, this connects past remembering, present sharing and future hope. In remembering Jesus' birth in a borrowed manger because of the bureaucracy of empire, we are reminded of his death and burial in a borrowed tomb, because of the violence of empire. But more than that, in celebrating Jesus coming as one of us, we also mark his dying and rising, and sharing in God's glory. Jesus took bread and wine and gave thanks. So let us give thanks. Let's pray.

Creator God, we give you thanks for bread. Reminder of you sustaining your people in the wilderness. May this bread be for us the bread of life. We give you thanks for wine, Reminder of redemption, freedom and joy, Reminder of Jesus sign of turning water of purification in to a heady taste of grace May this be for us the cup of blessing.

Saving God, We thank you that these symbols of creation become symbols of your saving love. May they make your love shown in Jesus

real for us now. Bread and wine remind us that you came in flesh and blood in Jesus And that you care about our lives. Bread broken and wine poured out remind us of his frailty His broken body on the cross, giving his life that we might have life in all its fulness. Bread and wine shared to connect faithful people, making his risen presence real for us now, giving us courage for the coming days. So may your Spirit connect us through these words and our prayers, be with us and within us, so that the bread which we break may be communion in the body of Christ, and the cup of blessing which we share may be communion in the blood of Christ, so make us your people for the world.

As we give thanks that God so loved the world, we pray for the world, remembering people and places in need of prayer. As we do what Jesus did, we pray as Jesus prayed, using the pattern of prayer he taught, saying together,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen

Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' This is the bread of heaven in Christ Jesus, food for life's journey, take and eat. In the same way, after supper he took the cup, and gave it to his disciples. This cup is the new covenant in Christ's blood shed for us and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever we do this, forgiveness and hope are real. Receive and drink.

Prayer after communion

God with us, we give you thanks for your gift beyond words. We have experienced wonder at the mystery of life. We have pondered the mystery of Jesus' living, dying and rising. We have been reminded that we are forgiven and free, we have been fed at your table, and called again to follow your Way of self-giving. When there are thoughts of turkey and sprouts, may this communion be a real lingering taste of Christmas. As we move through the season of Christmas, whatever food, presents and visitors we have, may this time, when we made room for Jesus, help us to know that he is with us always, to the end of the age, Amen

Hymn *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*
Charles Wesley (1707-1788) et al

Hark! the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the new-born King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!'
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies,
with the angelic hosts proclaim,
'Christ is born in Bethlehem'.

2 Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail, the Incarnate Deity,
pleased as a man with us to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel!

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the new-born King'*

3 Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!

Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die,
born to raise the folk of earth, born to give them second birth:

Blessing

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore. Amen

Closing Music *Deck the Halls* Percy Faith and Orchestra

Sources and Thanks

Call to worship adapted by Andy Braunston from a poem by Thomas Pestal. All other liturgical material written by the Rev'd Simon Walkling.

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On Christmas Night - English traditional after Luke Wadding (d.1686)
BBC Songs of Praise

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear - Edmund Hamilton Sears (1810-1876)
(alt.) Choir of King's College, Cambridge

Silent Night - Fr Joseph Mohr and Elisabeth Kruckenhauser tr by Emily Elliott The Choir, Kings College Cambridge

O Little Town Of Bethlehem - Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) (alt.) Sung by the Chet Valley Churches

Hark the Herald Angels Sing - Charles Wesley (1707-1788) and others
BBC Songs of Praise

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