

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Kathleen Richardson. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.

Call to Worship

The promise has been kept.
We celebrate again the birth of God's Son.
We greet him with wonder and with joy.
Let us worship God revealed in human form.

Hymn Joy to the World (Singing the Faith 330)

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cr8myPmEpWw>

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King:
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!

Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Prayer

Father of all,
We praise you for Jesus,
the human sign that you are among us as Saviour and hope,
for all times and all people.
We praise you for the way he was born, as we are born;
given access to your revelation through faithful people
waiting for your promises to be fully realised;
growing in understanding and power,
until through death and resurrection he appeared as our living
Lord.

Here and now, we praise you and celebrate your victory of love.

Gracious God, as we reflect on the past year, we see so much pain and distress in your world; through the Covid 19 virus, lockdown, isolation, and the devastating consequences for so many families. Across your world people suffer, and faith in your loving purposes is put under test.

Yet we praise you for every sign of your activity among us, for the variety of the gifts your Spirit gives to enable and encourage our faith, to increase our understanding, and to empower our service.

You came, and you come, into a world of suffering and through coming you bring hope.

We worship you.

Prayer of Confession

Lord, it can be hard for us to remain faithful and hopeful.

Forgive us that we so often refuse to see you at work in ourselves or each other;

that we give in to darkness and despair.

We are impatient with others, dismissive of their gifts and unwilling to trust.

We have become less expectant of meeting you, unwilling to look for you in the ordinary business of our days.

You know this and you still love us.

You invite us to come close to you.

Set us free from our fears and feelings of hopelessness, forgive our mistakes and our despair,

open our hearts to know that you will be with us,

your Spirit guiding us this day and in the year to come.

Through Jesus, Lord and Saviour

Amen.

Reading Luke 2:21-39

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons'.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, as a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel".

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too".

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but

worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

Reflection

The concept of time becomes a bit confused around the season of Christmas. I rather like the comment made in my hearing on one nativity play Sunday when a little girl of perhaps four, but old beyond her years, looked rather scathingly at the baby in the manger and said, "Huh! I thought he'd be walking by now!" And there is the sort of theology of the nativity play that surrounds the birth narratives so that it seems quite proper for the shepherds and angels to be still hanging around while the wise men join them before we all sing another carol.

But the lectionary nudges us into seeing it a bit differently and invites us to wait for another week, around 6th January, before we celebrate the coming of the wise men, and the flight into Egypt.

And Luke seems to know nothing about that at all. He is more concerned to establish the credentials of Jesus as the Messiah. The reading today from Luke's gospel moves us forward eight days to the circumcision and naming of Jesus according to the Jewish law, which would be done in the home. Luke then appears to be a little confused about the detail of the Jewish law surrounding the birth of a first-born son. All first-born sons had to be presented to a priest and be redeemed by an offering of 5 shekels. Luke says Jesus was presented in the Temple but doesn't mention the redemption price, leading some scholars to think this was deliberate – Jesus was not redeemed, but consecrated to God.

Then forty days after giving birth a mother had to be purified by the sacrifice of a sheep, or if this could not be afforded, a pair of turtle-doves or two pigeons. Luke tells us this took place in the Temple before the family moved back to Nazareth in Galilee. And he records that Jesus is recognised by two old people, who see in him all the hopes of the devout people of Israel.

The lectionary gives us the opportunity only once in every three years to look at this passage of Scripture – so I am making the most today of this story of two old people who after years of faithful service and hope are given the privilege

of seeing God at work and become witnesses to the reality of faith, and not only for the nation of Israel, but for the world and its peoples.

Getting old is not always a gentle process. We lose some of our strength and mobility, and we can sometimes feel we have become a liability or not needed any more. I wonder - did these two old people ever have doubts in all those years of watching and waiting for God. Were they ever tempted to give up their hope of seeing the consolation of Israel – which was a way of referring to the coming of the Messiah? They had seen the rule of Rome become ever more cruel and demanding, the temple system enriching the priests, the Pharisees demanding stricter practices and harsher penalties for breaking petty rules. Did Simeon, a devout and righteous man, often come into the temple and take children into his arms and look at them with hope in his heart or was this the first time he had been given an indication that there would be good news, though he foresaw it would be touched by conflict and pain. And Anna – living as a widow in the temple precincts in uncomfortable circumstances – how had she continued in her old age to maintain such belief, and such hope?

I often look to see what John Wesley has to say about a passage in his Notes on the New Testament. On this one he

writes, 'Let the example of these aged saints animate those whose hoary heads, like theirs, are a crown of glory, being found in the way of righteousness'.

So today, will all those of hoary heads sprouting crowns of glory join me in thanking God that we can maybe still play a part in God's purposes and that our praying, waiting and watching is not in vain! Can we find in the deepest recesses of our spirits the faith that doesn't always look back to the good old days but forward to the promise of light; and that even in these times of challenge affirms that God is working his purpose out?

In one of the Advent study groups we were invited to think back to a time when we might have taken part in a nativity play – what part did we play. My mind went back some seventy years, when I was told I was to be the Angel Gabriel. It was more to do with my height than my acting ability, because I was painfully shy. We were ambitious that year and were telling the story of the birth of Jesus in tableaux form. The choir pews at the front of the chapel were boarded over with the tops of the trestle tables and a spotlight erected in the gallery. We were to stand still, wait for the light to shine on us then say our part. I waited in trepidation, the feathered wings that had been passed from one angel to another over the years

trembling on my back. My moment of glory came. I opened my mouth, declared with fervour "Fear not, I bring you tidings of good news!" And against all I had been told I took a mighty step forward towards the light, caught my foot in the gap between the boards and fell flat on my face! Oh! the shame!

But to this day I still feel I was right. We have good news to tell that God has not forgotten his people, and we might need to reach out in different ways to convey this message of hope.

While we have missed the precious and familiar celebrations of Christmas, we have cherished each moment that has linked us with friends and families and the essence of God with us – Immanuel – is more startlingly real.

Prayers of Intercession

God with us - you know and love your world and we open our hearts and minds to you, sharing our concerns and listening to your concerns and your call to act

With the baby in the manger,
we pray for all mothers and babies, and those who support them

With Simeon and Anna,

we pray for those who wait in hope or fear, for life or death
With seekers and worshippers,
we pray for your Spirit to be at work in hearts and minds
to recognise your presence in our world

With those who speak out for justice,
we pray for your kingdom to be made known on earth

With those in poverty,
we pray for the transformation of worldly systems
that keep people trapped and exposed to exploitation

With all creation,
we pray for climate justice and an awakening to our
responsibilities

God with us, we seek your Spirit to transform and guide us,
for your people to acknowledge your rule and walk in your
ways; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

The Lords' Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name;
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen

Hymn Let Earth and Heaven Combine (Singing the Faith 208)

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ms8YwOwwrNQ>

Let earth and heaven combine, angels and all agree,
to praise in songs divine the incarnate Deity,
our God contracted to a span,
incomprehensibly made man.

He laid his glory by, he wrapped him in our clay;
unmarked by human eye, the latent Godhead lay;
infant of days he here became,
and bore the mild Immanuel's name.

Unsearchable the love that has the Saviour brought;
the grace is far above both earth's and angels' thought:
suffice for us that God, we know,

our God is manifest below.

He deigns in flesh to appear, widest extremes to join;
to bring our vileness near, and make us all divine:
and we the life of God shall know,
for God is manifest below.

Made perfect first in love, and sanctified by grace,
we shall from earth remove, and see his glorious face:
his love shall then be fully showed,
and we shall all be lost in God.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Blessing

May we be ready to see God at work in the world,
open to hope for God's ways in the world,
and holding God's love in our lives.

The blessing of God, loving Father, new-born Son, living Spirit
be with us and all those whom we are given to love,
this day and always. Amen