

Christmas Day service – transcript

Welcome to our service for Christmas Day.

Today is a celebration of light coming into the world in the form of a tiny baby. A time for gratitude, but also a moment to remember that we live in a world that needs light and hope at this time. So as we gather to recall the story of that first Christmas, let us pray:

God of Mary and Joseph,
God of the shepherds and the Wise Men,
God of the baby lying in a manger,
God with us,
Touch our hearts with the living presence of Jesus,
Fill us with the love and joy which God alone can bring,
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

O little town of Bethlehem

- 1 O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.
- 2 O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King,
and peace to men 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 to us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell:
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel.

Luke 2.8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Homily

The job of setting the table for Christmas dinner is one I love doing every year. After laying the Christmas cloth and napkins, placing the cutlery and wine glasses, and lighting the candle in the holly wreath, comes my favourite bit. Putting the crackers at each place. I love crackers! I love the surprising gift, the bit of trivia, the puzzle or riddle, the crown to wear and of course the joke! Here's a good one.... Good King Wenceslas rings up his local pizza place, 'I'd like a pizza delivered,' he says. 'Will that be the usual order, sir?' 'Yes,' says Wenceslas, 'deep pan, crisp and even.' What about the one with two ships who collided at sea? One carrying red paint, the other blue. All the sailors ended up being marooned!

Although they didn't have crackers on that first Christmas Day, our Gospel story tells us of how the shepherds, were utterly surprised when suddenly the angel of the Lord and a great heavenly host appeared before them bringing the good news of great joy of the birth of the Messiah. And how amazed they were that they, just lowly, unimportant shepherds, were to be *personally* told of this great and glorious thing that had come to pass. They weren't expecting that!

This reminds me of another story of surprise. There was an old man who lived alone. Each week he left his home to do his shopping at the local parade of shops. This was the highlight of his week as it was the only time he saw or spoke to anyone, even if it was only to tell the two busy and hassled looking women who served him which fruit and vegetables he wanted. He still looked forward to it. One Christmas Eve he set out on his familiar weekly outing to the shops. The ground was thick with snow and there was a bitter wind blowing. It all felt a little bit harder as he shuffled wearily down the street. The twinkling lights and festive music did little to cheer his spirits. At the greengrocers, the same two women were behind the counter, only today they seemed different. They were wearing jingly Santa hats and seemed jolly and full of good cheer. As the women weighed out his sprouts and gave him his change something totally surprising happened. They said to the old man, 'wait there please – don't move.' And then they came out from behind the counter and gave the man a great big hug and said, 'Merry Christmas.' It was the most warm and tender moment that filled the old man's heart with joy. He wasn't expecting that!

The shepherds in Bethlehem and this dear old man were taken aback and surprised. And this brings us back to where we started. Crackers. As a cracker is full of surprises, so our God too is full of surprises. You see, God leaves His station and comes round to our side of the counter. He does not stand apart from us, aloof, measuring out love and grace

behind a distant counter. He enters the world from our side and embraces us here, now, right where we are, on the hillside or in the greengrocers. God chooses to come and make His home with each one of us. All of us. No-one is too unimportant or out of reach of the unconditional love of God. Puzzling it may be, but a bit of trivia or a joke it is not. God, in Christ, comes to us today. Not as a baby to be crowned a king, but so that He could crown us, you and me, with His love, mercy, compassion and grace.

As you pull your cracker today may you be reminded of this wonderful thing that has happened and may it fill you with the joy and peace of Christmas.

Amen.

Prayers of intercession

Dear God,

At this Holy time, there was no room for your Son in the inn.
Protect with your love those who have no home
and all who live in poverty.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

At this Holy time, Christ came as a light shining in the darkness.
Bring comfort to all who suffer in the sadness of our world.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

At this Holy time, the angels sang, 'Peace to God's people on earth.'
Strengthen those who work for peace and justice in all the world and give humility and
wisdom to all who govern.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

At this Holy time, shepherds in the field heard good tidings of joy.
Fill our hearts with joy at this special time of year and help us to share that joy with
those around us.
Holy God
hear our prayer.

At this Holy time, strangers found the Holy Family,
and saw the baby lying in the manger.
Bless our homes and all whom we love.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

At this Holy time, Christians the world over celebrate Christ's birth.
Open our hearts that he may be born in us today.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

Christ, whose radiance filled a lowly manger,
give the glory of your resurrection to all who rest in you.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

Thank you Lord for sending us the gift of your Son, so that we may have a very merry Christmas. We thank you for the star that guided the little donkey carrying Mary safely to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. May we who worship here, know the presence of Jesus in our lives this day and every day. **Amen**

O come, all ye faithful

- 1 O come, all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant
O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem
come and behold him
born the King of Angels.
*O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord.*
- 2 God of God, Light of Light;
lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb;
very God,
begotten not created;
Refrain
- 3 Sing, choirs of angels,
sing in exultation,
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God
in the highest:
Refrain
- 4 Yea, Lord, we greet thee,
born this happy morning:
Jesus, to thee be all glory given;
word of the Father,
now in flesh appearing;
Refrain

*Translated from the Latin (18th century)
by Frederick Oakely (1802-1880)*

Blessing

As we come to the end of our service today, may I wish you all a blessed and peaceful Christmas, and a joyful and hope-filled New Year.

May God unwrap you this Christmas,
like the precious gift you are to the world.
May you be filled with joy to overflowing,
like a stocking bearing countless surprises.
May you be showered with love by those around you
as you are by the God who gives all good gifts.
And may you know the peace of Jesus,
the Christ-child who came to change the world for ever.
And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
bless you and keep you
today, this Christmas time, and always.
Amen