

2023 January 1st - Second Sunday of Christmas. Naming and Circumcision of Christ.

Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148;
Hebrews 2:10-end; Matthew 2:13-end.

A week ago we celebrated the birth of Christ and sang “Gloria in excelsis Deo” alongside the angels; a week hence we shall celebrate the Epiphany, kneeling with the Wise Men and paying homage to Jesus. Between those two Sundays we have today, a day when the Christ-Child is still a tiny baby, a day which should be a day of great joy, albeit a day of exhaustion after a week of broken nights, but still a day of joy! But then we hear our Gospel reading.

Herod the King, raging with fear and anger that a new King of the Jews has been born, has decided to kill all the children under two years old in Bethlehem to make sure that he kills this new king. Bethlehem resounds with the tears and wailing of mothers whose children have been taken from them and killed. Jesus alone has escaped: warned by a dream, Joseph has taken Mary and the child across the border into Egypt; they are refugees in a hostile land.



What a change from last Sunday, and from next Sunday (although, logically, today's events follow on from the arrival of the Wise Men in Jerusalem and their visit to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem.) Whereas all was rejoicing, now all is fear and destruction, and a young family, a new baby, running for their lives.

I wonder how Joseph took his family across the border? Did he have the contacts and resources to do so himself, or did he have to rely on people-traffickers?

I wonder where the Holy Family stayed in Egypt? Did they have relatives or friends, or members of an expatriate Jewish community who could vouch for them and put them up, or were they stuck in an immigration centre?

I wonder how Joseph got the money to feed and clothe his new-born son and new mother? Did he have money, could he ply his trade and earn money, did he need state support?

I wonder how many families waiting at the English Channel or in border camps in France are like Joseph and Mary and the new-born baby, desperate to escape oppression and even murder? I wonder how many families in camps or hotels or B&Bs in Kent and down the East Coast are like the Holy Family, people with skills but with no home and nowhere to rest safe at night.

The writer to the Hebrews wrote “[Jesus] became like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.” Jesus, the Son of God, came from highest heaven and was born on earth and went about among us, living a life just like the lives of those around him then, of those around him today. Although the whole world came into being through him, although the whole world owes its allegiance to him, although every knee in heaven and in earth must bow at his name, yet Jesus stood alongside the poorest and the weakest and he still stands alongside the poorest and the weakest. To those at risk or death, murder, exploitation he says “I am near”; to those fleeing oppression and disaster, he says “I am near”; to those with no home to call their own and no hope for returning to their own land, he says “I am near”.

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God did not send his only Son into the world to live a charmed life, free from all the problems, even the disasters, which afflict real people living real lives in the real world. There is nothing good to say about today's Gospel, there is nothing good to say about warfare, the displacement of individuals and families, the destruction of life, the frailty of those whom the world abuses, nothing can redeem the horror of this story or their stories. But, still there is hope.

The prophet Isaiah promised "It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." The presence of Jesus in Bethlehem even as the soldiers were entering the city to seek and kill the children, the presence of Jesus as a refugee, immigrant, homeless, helpless, does not make the evil that man inflicts on man acceptable, but it does affirm that in Jesus God is at work redeeming a world and saving people whose lives he knows through and through because he has lived that life.

Image: Pieter Bruegel the Elder ca. 1520 – 1569. Massacre of the Innocents. 1566-1567 Royal Collection, Windsor Castle, Windsor.

2023 January 8th - Epiphany (transferred).

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72;

Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Three Kings from Persian lands afar
To Jordan follow the pointing star:
And this the quest of the travellers three,
Where the new-born King of the Jews may be.
Full royal gifts they bear for the King;
Gold, incense, myrrh are their offering.
How brightly shines the morning star!
With grace and truth from heaven afar
Our Jesse tree now bloweth.

The star shines out with a steadfast ray;
The kings to Bethlehem make their way,
And there in worship they bend the knee,
As Mary's child in her lap they see;
Their royal gifts they show to the King;
Gold, incense, myrrh are their offering.
Of Jacob's stem and David's line,
For thee, my Bridegroom, King divine,
My soul with love o'erfloweth.

Thou child of man, lo, to Bethlehem
The Kings are travelling, travel with them!
The star of mercy, the star of grace,
Shall lead thy heart to its resting place.
Gold, incense, myrrh thou canst not bring;
Offer thy heart to the infant King.
Thy word, Jesu, Inly feeds us,
Rightly leads us, Life bestowing.
Praise, O praise such love o'erflowing.

This hymn, by Peter Cornelius, tells the story of the Wise Men (in the Bible they are not called kings) coming to see Jesus, weaving part of the New Testament story together with some of the Old Testament prophecies of the One whom God would send to his people.

When the Wise Men came looking for the new-born King of the Jews they

no doubt had ideas about who he would be and what he would be like - that's why they turned up at the Royal Court of King Herod, the obvious place to find the New King. Their ideas were based on their own experience of kinship, majesty and authority; their choice of gifts were appropriate for one who would lead his people in statecraft and warfare, worship and religious life.

The Wise Men were no doubt surprised to hear the Old Testament prophecy that the One sent by God would be born in Bethlehem, which, whilst it had been the birthplace of King David, had never been a royal capital. They were no doubt even more surprised to see Jesus in a normal house, with working-class parents. And yet, when they saw him they were convinced that he was The One, and so they bowed down in worship and left their gifts.

In this hymn we are invited to join them in recognising Jesus as The One, and to help us we are told more of the Old Testament prophecies which prepare us to see the King of the Universe in the Babe of Bethlehem.

Well over 1,000 years before Jesus was born, a foreign prophet foresaw a "Star arising from Jacob" (Numbers 24:17). The Star arising from Jacob is the culmination of the family tree of Jesse, the father of King David. God had always called his people his "bride", and that Star at the top of Jesse's tree is the Bridegroom who has rescued the Bride - a name used for both the people of Israel and for the Church. The Bright Morning Star, the King of

David's Line, the Bridegroom has ransomed the life of his people, filling their hearts with love and their lives with his Eternal Life.

The Wise Men who saw Jesus did not know the prophecies, the history or the future, but when they saw Jesus, they knew him. We know the prophecies and the history, we have been given hope for the future; we too must

kneel down and worship this child who is the King of the Universe, promised from eternity to save the world.

image: *Sir Edward Burne-Jones The Adoration of the Magi (1904) Musée d'Orsay, Paris.*



2023 January 15th – Second Sunday of Epiphany.

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12;

1 Corinthians 1:109, I John 1:29-42.

The Christmas story is full of people who come and go. Angels come to Zechariah, to Mary and to Joseph, they pass on their message and they go. A whole choir of angels appear to the shepherds, but then they go. The shepherds come to the manger, but then they go back to their flocks of sheep out in the fields. The Wise Men come to see the Christ child, but then they go back home again by another route. At Christmas many people come to church - for a carol service, nativity play, Christmas tree festival, Midnight Mass or Christmas morning, but then they go back home again. The only one who comes and doesn't go is Jesus himself; as St John said in the wonderful Christmas reading "he was in the world, and the world came into being through him."

Although we keep the festival right through to Candlemas on 2nd February, forty days of Christmas, by now, the second Sunday of Epiphany, the tinsel is tarnished, the manger needs dusting, and we're so used to having the Christchild around that we no longer notice him. Jesus, God the Son, is dwelling with us. Just a few weeks' ago that was amazing news, but now, we're so used to the idea that we forget what it means. God made man in his own image, and has now enobled the men he made by being born in human flesh; God formed us and has transformed us, transformed the whole world, the maker has made himself part of all that he made, and has made it all good. We had time at Christmas, between Christmas and New Year, maybe even up to Epiphany to contemplate the Christ and the Incarnation, God becoming man, but now it's back to work, back to every day life, back to busyness, and the invisible God made visible to us is soon overlooked.

So, our readings today recall us to the vision of the reality of God at work among us, God on earth among us, Jesus here with us, Emmanuel. The Prophet Isaiah promised that a Servant of the Lord would come. This servant would be chosen before he was born, formed in his mother's womb to do God's will; this servant would bring redemption to God's people Israel, but he would not stop there, for he would bring redemption to God's world, to you and me and everyone who will accept it. And yet, the people to whom he was sent (hat's you and me and all the people in the world) would manage to overlook him, ignore him, leave him alone. His labour would seem to be in vain; people would hear his message of redemption, but would reject it;

people would hear his message for repentance, but ignore it; people would hear his message of love, but despise it. And yet, although those to whom he was sent would turn their backs, God promised that even kings and rulers would come to know that in the Servant of the Lord resides the full majesty and power of God the King.

So, with that vision of the Servant of the Lord, despised by man, but honoured by God, in our eyes and imagination, we turn to St John's Gospel. John the Baptist saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus and stay with him, and in that moment, John knew that his cousin was the Messiah, the Chosen of God, and he knew that the Chosen of God was the Son of God.

So, John points his disciples towards Jesus, away from himself, for he was only the forerunner, the announcer, the warm-up act, for Jesus. John points his disciples towards Jesus, and they follow him, and when Jesus asks what they want they say "where are you staying", and then they stay with him.

Amongst all the coming and going of Christmas, only one stays for ever, and that is Jesus, and he invites us to see where he is staying here on earth and stay with him now that we may stay with him always, here on earth as it is in heaven.

image: **Domenico Ghirlandaio; The Nativity, 1488** *Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam*



Reflection for Sunday 22nd January 2023 – Third Sunday of Epiphany and Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27: 1-11
1 Corinthian 1:10-18
Matthew 4: 12-23

This Sunday marks the mid-point of this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This is a global event marked in the northern hemisphere between 18th and 25th January. Because this is a holiday time in the southern hemisphere they usually observe the week of prayer between Easter and Pentecost. Each year a different country and Christian tradition creates the theme and prepares the material. For this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we are guided by the churches of Minneapolis, USA as we seek to explore how the work of Christian unity can contribute to the promotion of racial justice across all levels of society. Through this resource, the CTBI writers' group has also focussed our attention on the 30th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, which we mark in 2023. The work of restoring hope through justice undertaken in Stephen's memory continues to inspire and change lives for the better. The following reflection is part of this year's material.

Jesus prays that we will be “completely one”, praying for an authentic and selfless unity, one with no half measures, reflected in the person of God, in the unity of the Trinity. Such unity is challenging, it requires self-reflection, humility, a release of power and control, and an openness to change. Is this the unity that you are praying for this week? Isaiah reminds us of the hypocrisy that can still exist in our churches, claiming a love for others, but really only extending a full welcome to those who are like us. Many have experienced pain, rejection, abuse, and exclusion within the Church. A Christian expression of unity must

include everyone and offer healing and justice. This is rarely done in isolation, but more often together. Instead of offering empty worship Isaiah calls us to “learn to do good; seek justice” (Isaiah 1:17). Learning to do good also requires an openness to change. This is the perfect season for Christians to reflect not just on unity but on the role we can all play together in promoting racial justice. To seek justice is to create space for God's just ordering and enduring wisdom in a world all too often unmoved by suffering. And yet, there is joy in doing what is right. There is joy in affirming that “Black Lives Matter” in the pursuit of justice for God's oppressed, dominated, and exploited beloved. There is power in giving in to wisdom's call for justice, and in doing it as a church together.

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Photo: Mazur/cbcew.org.uk

Prayer:

God of Unity, forgive us when we are self-serving and help us to grow in unity and understanding as we extend your love and justice to all.

Tony White

2023 Sunday 29th January - Candlemas, Presentation of Christ in the Temple (transferred).

Malachi 3:1-5, Psalm 24;

Hebrews 2:14-end; Luke 2:22-40.

Sidney Carter wrote a number of popular hymns including “I danced in the morning”, “When I needed a neighbour” and “One more step along the world I go.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w2WhUJHalo>

One more step along the world I go
One more step along the world I go
From the old things to the new
Keep me traveling along with you

'Round the corners of the world I turn
More and more about the world I learn
And the new things that I see
You'll be looking at along with me

As I travel through the bad and good
Keep me traveling the way I should
Where I see no way to go
You'll be telling me the way, I know

Give me courage when the world is rough
Keep me loving though the world is tough
Leap and sing in all I do
Keep me traveling along with you

You are older than the world can be
You are younger than the life in me
Ever old and ever new
Keep me traveling along with you

And it's from the old I travel to the new
Keep me traveling along with you

It's a hymn which tries to express what it means that the Word of God was present in the beginning with God, that all things have come into being through him, that he became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory.

It goes beyond academic theological truth and tries to express what it means to live with the God who is ever old and ever new beside us and in us as we travel through life.

Sydney Carter wrote this hymn for children leaving primary school and moving on to the big and sometimes frightening world of secondary school, but I've also sung it at weddings and funerals and baptisms. People choose this hymn as a way of reaching out a hand to God to walk beside them whatever life throws their way.



As I was reflecting on today's Gospel, old Simeon and Anna in the temple, meeting baby Jesus and seeing in him the light and love of God, my mind turned to this hymn. It's not a Christmas hymn and it doesn't mention Jesus by name but it expresses the same hope as Simeon: God who was in the beginning will be with us through life and even into death.

So, as we finally leave Christmas behind, I wonder where you are travelling this year, I wonder where you will see new things, I wonder where you will need a guide, I wonder when you will need courage to keep leaping and singing and travelling from the old to the new. This hymn reminds us that the light which enlightens the Gentiles, the light that is the glory of Israel is the salvation of God, here on earth with us today and for ever.

The festival of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple is also called Candlemas. It's the day when candles would be blessed for use in church throughout the year, and those candles are a reminder to us of the light of Christ. Perhaps today you could light a candle and pray that the light when enlightened Simeon and Anna will enlighten you and travel with you throughout the year. You may not be able to keep the candle burning every day for the year, but perhaps you could put the part-burned stub somewhere you can see it every day to remind you that the baby in the manger at Christmas is the light to enlighten the whole world every day and for ever.

image: Rembrandt: Simeon's song of praise. National museum, Stockholm