

God is with us! In the light of a new hope

Opening prayer:

Gentle, nurturing God, breathe your still calm voice into this time and this space.
Enfold me in your loving embrace as we share in this, your holy fellowship.
In the name of Jesus, born amongst us, I pray. Amen.

Hymn 181 StF

Of the Father's love begotten

Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the source, the ending he,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore.

By his word was all created;
He commanded, it was done;
Earth and sky and boundless ocean,
Universe of three in one;
All that sees the moon's soft radiance,
All that breathes beneath the sun,
Evermore and evermore.

This is he whom seers in old time
Chanted of with one accord,
Whom the voices of the prophets
Promised in their faithful word;
Let creation praise its Lord,
Evermore and evermore.

O you heights of heaven, adore him;
Angel hosts, his praises sing;
All dominions, bow before him,
And extol our God and King;
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Every voice in concert sing,
Evermore and evermore.

Prayers:

God of life and light who came and lived amongst us, Christ made man, son of Mary.
who grew from child of hope to Man of God I praise your holy name.
God of forgiveness and grace, I ask your healing forgiveness for all that does not honour and serve your love,
and trust in your unchanging promise: I give thanks that you forgive my sins.
God of time and patience whose eternal spirit reaches out to us and brings time to pause, to wait, for your still small
voice of calm.
Holy Spirit, our great companion. move amongst us and reveal your kingdom in this time and this place.
In the name of God, our creator, redeemer, and Sustainer I pray. Amen.

Collect of the Day:

God of glory, who wonderfully created us in your own image and yet more wonderfully restored us in your Son Jesus
Christ: grant that as he came to share in our humanity, so we may share in the life of his divinity, who is alive and
reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Old Testament Reading Isaiah 61:10-62:3

This second part of the book of the prophet Isaiah is believed by contemporary commentators to have been written
during the time of the exile in Babylon, a period when life was really tough and in a time of doom and gloom and
despondency, the role of the prophets is to inject optimism and hope into their dire situation. Writing this on the
day after the Prime Minister has announced much tighter restrictions with over eighteen million people in this
country entering tier four restrictions, meaning no mixing at Christmas. Maybe as plans change for most of us this
Christmas at very short notice, we can empathise with the Israelites and maybe the words of the prophet, spoken
generations ago, can bring us hope.

Consider:

- *How have your plans changed this Christmas? How does that make you feel?*
- *There is much talk about Christmas being cancelled. Has your Christmas been cancelled? Or, has it taken a new form? Does that make you feel sad, or thankful?*

- *The last verse of the hymn "O come all ye faithful" is normally the reserve of Christmas Day, at a time when we might have to celebrate the incarnation of Christ at a different point in the year, can we sing "ye Lord we greet thee, born this happy morning" on a day other than Christmas Day?*

Hymn 197 StF

Cradled in a manger, meanly,
laid the Son of Man his head;
sleeping his first earthly slumber
where the oxen had been fed.
Happy were those shepherds listening
to the holy angel's word;
happy they within that stable
worshipping their infant Lord.

Happy all who hear the message
of his coming from above;
happier still who hail his coming,
and with praises greet his love.
Blessèd Saviour, Christ most holy,
in a manger thou didst rest;
canst thou stoop again, yet lower,
and abide within my breast?

Evil things are there before thee;
in the heart, where they have fed,
wilt thou pitifully enter,
Son of Man, and lay thy head?
Enter, then, O Christ most holy;
make a Christmas in my heart;
make a heaven of my manger:
it is heaven where thou art.

And to those who never listened
to the message of thy birth,
who have winter, but no Christmas
bringing them thy peace on earth,
send to these the joyful tidings;
by all people, in each home,
be there heard the Christmas anthem;
praise to God, the Christ has come!

A time of prayer:

Enduring, eternal God, of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, and Joseph, who left all behind them to follow you.

We ask for your strength and guidance to follow in their footsteps.

Powerful, transforming God, of Isaiah and Ezekiel, Micah, and Amos, who spoke of you in their time and their place, we ask for your powerful words and actions in places of need today.

Creating, unsettling God, of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for your arrival, help us to continue to prepare your way and equip us in your service.

Parenting, nurturing, God, of Mary and Joseph, we think of our families, those we choose and those chosen for us, we call them to mind bring us into your warm embrace so that no matter how near or far we know your love reaches out to us all.

Patient, hope-filled God, of Simeon and Anna we give thanks for those whose testimony, and fellowship to you crosses generations. We pray for your church, trusting that as we watch and wait, work, and pray, we can bear witness to the love of God, the light of Christ and the wisdom of the Spirit. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer:

Gospel Luke 2: 22-40

As the nation appears to feel that "Christmas this year is cancelled" because of Covid restrictions and today, two days after the big day, we might even join our friends in the secular world as we miss being with our families and all the festivities we normally enjoy, let us not forget that the first Christmas was a fairly low key affair, and despite the presence of the heavenly host, and exotic visitors from a foreign land, the early life of the Messiah was witnessed by a handful of people. George Stringer Rowe, the author of our last hymn refers to "those who never listened to the message" those who "have winter, but no Christmas" and I know that in 2020 those people still exist in plentiful supply.

Christmas for us should mean so much more. Simeon and Anna were old people and there is something wonderful about them being able to depart this life in peace, with the knowledge of the gift from God that they are witnessing. Even in these times when we are restricted from what we can do, God is still with us in the shape of the Trinity, God the creator, God, the baby born in the manger, who went on to be the Christ upon the cross and in the power of the Holy Spirit, around us and within us every day. Covid 19 and Government restrictions might have changed the shape of this Christmas, but Christmas can never, ever be cancelled!

Consider:

- *In the midst of all that we have lost during this season of Advent and Christmas, what will be your lasting memories of Christmas 2020? What will you be thankful for?*
- *Simeon and Anna give thanks because they have seen God with their own eyes. Where have you seen God in the whole Covid experience?*

- *Think for a moment of those who will have replied "I haven't seen God in any of this, my life and my faith have been broken because of this experience" what can we do as the Church together and as individual Christians to share the love of God?*

Hymn 222 StF:

Who would think that what was needed
to transform and save the earth
might not be a plan or army,
proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision,
that a child should lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas Day.

Centuries of skill and science
span the past from which we move,
yet experience questions whether,
with such progress, we improve.
While the human lot we ponder,
lest our hopes and humour fray,
God surprises earth with heaven
coming here on Christmas Day.

Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,
monarchs scorn and angels sing;
such a place as none would reckon
hosts a holy helpless thing;
Stable beasts and by-passed strangers
watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven
coming here on Christmas Day.

A prayer of blessing

Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace:
your word has been fulfilled.
My own eyes have seen the salvation
which you prepared in the sight of every people;
A light to reveal you to the nations
and the glory of your people Israel.
Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.