



Call to worship

Lord God, We come to you because in your love, you have invited us.
We worship you, because you have shown us how to love in Spirit and truth.
You support us in quiet contemplation, when the audacity of your promises overwhelms us.
We are eager in our expectation, because the beauty of your promises enriches our spirits.
We need you with us always, because you are our God, and you love us. Amen.

Hymn 188, *There's a light upon the mountains*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOCqAlA9m04>

There's a light upon the mountains, and the day is at the spring,
when our eyes shall see the beauty and the glory of the King;
weary was our heart with waiting, and the night watch seemed so long;
but his triumph-day is breaking, and we hail it with a song.

There's a hush of expectation, and a quiet in the air;
and the breath of God is moving in the fervent breath of prayer:
for the suffering, dying Jesus is the Christ upon the throne,
and the travail of our spirit is the travail of his own.

He is breaking down the barriers, he is casting up the way;
he is calling for his angels to build up the gates of day:
but his angels here are human, not the shining hosts above;
for the drum-beats of his army are the heart-beats of our love.

Hark! We hear a distant music, and it comes with fuller swell;
'tis the triumph song of Jesus, of our King, Immanuel:
Zion go now forth to meet him; and my soul be swift to bring
all your finest and your noblest for the triumph of our King!

Henry Burton, public domain

Reflection and Prayer

This hymn is often sung in Advent as we prepare for the incarnation of Christ, but it also offers some powerful thoughts for reflection at any time.

Read again the words in verse 2:

There's a hush of expectation, and a quiet in the air; and the breath of God is moving in the fervent breath of prayer.

Use these words as you quietly reach out to God in your prayer of adoration – hold onto that quiet expectation, just lingering in your mind as you empty your thoughts of all the bustle and noise of the world around you. In that stillness and quiet be full of wonder at the glory of God whom we have just celebrated for entering into this world as the vulnerable baby who promises to take the world by storm, not by human force, but by the astonishing power of abundant love.

Words of adoration

Lord God, may my adoration be worthy of you, may my worship honour you, and may my life be given to you with the same freedom that you gave yourself to the world.

Fill me with expectation as your promises speak to me. Make me eager and full of hope, as I look to your promises to be fulfilled.

Echo the words of Simeon when the baby Jesus was presented (Luke 2:29-30) – *“Now Lord, may I be at peace for my eyes have seen your salvation – a light for the Gentiles and glory for your people.”*

Words seeking forgiveness

Forgive me, when I struggle to be excited by your promises.
Forgive me, if my expectation for your coming wanes.

Forgive me, when my joy at the glory of your coming fades and no longer shines to light the way for others. Help me to find peace and comfort in your promise that I am indeed forgiven.

Scripture

Read Luke 3 verses 15-18 and 21-22

Reflection

We have only just left the celebration of Christmas, the enormity of the BIG idea that God is prepared to let go of his might and power and authority, and come to life on earth in the most vulnerable form – in the baby Jesus. Like any baby, utterly dependent on the love, nurture, guidance and influence of those who will shape his life as he grows and matures into independence and adulthood.

If we blink we miss the significance of epiphany – that time when the truth of God's incarnation was exposed to the world, as the scientists – the seekers after truth who had put their life on hold so that they could seek to unravel the mystery and find answers to their new questions – came to worship him .

In our unsavoury haste to move the story forward towards the other BIG moment in the Christian calendar, it is too easy to gloss over the formative years. Ponder, how much of the character of our Saviour was shaped and influenced by the nurture. Just think about Jesus' encounter with the spiritual colossus Nicodemus in John 3. You must be born of the spirit as well as the flesh. The Christchild, protected by the blankets in the manger was born of the flesh – to be born with an instinct to survive at any cost. But it was with the power of love and nurture at the hands and under the influence of Mary that this survival instinct was balanced by the power of love – to be born of the spirit. To be born to care. To be filled with an empathy and compassion.

If we move on our own journey too quickly, we don't have time to explore the significance of the baby growing to adulthood, the child prodigy engaging with and confounding the experts with his maturity of understanding. The carefree child frightening his doting parents as he prefers being deeply embroiled in scholarly conversation instead of tagging along with his peers as they start their weary journey home.

In all those events, we see Jesus maturing in character, experiencing life, learning to read relationships, and see through the artificial persona people put on outward show, in order to hide the part of themselves they don't want the world to see.

We cannot fully come to know Jesus unless we take some time to wonder at how he learnt so much of human nature, before he was ready to begin his ministry.

On what is only the third Sunday after Christmas, we are guided by our readings set for today to stand alongside John the Baptist, as the crowds gather to hear his message, just before Jesus himself arrives for his own baptism. As I looked at the passage, frustrated that we were rushing away from the incarnation without stopping to reflect on all those significant, formative moments, I was brought up short by the way this scene is set.

The people were waiting. They were expecting something. Or as the New living translation puts it

Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah.

This was a crowd of people who had heard about some strange character who was out in the middle of nowhere condemning everyone for their lifestyle, and their lack of concern for living the kind of life that prophets down the ages had told them would be their downfall. They hadn't just come out to have a laugh at someone making a fool of themselves, they had come out to see if at long last the promise God had made to his people would be fulfilled. They were eager. They were full of expectation. They went out of their way, out of their comfort zone to see whether the promises from long ago were beginning to come true, and they would be relieved of the tyranny of their oppressive rulers. They were eager, they were full of expectation.

Amidst this eager mass of energy and excitement, John responds with more challenges and threats of condemnation if they don't take his message seriously. You might be keen to hear my words, and eager to receive my blessing and baptism of repentance, but the power and authority of the one you really seek puts me totally in the shade. Against him, I am not worthy to act as his servant or even stoop at his feet. The one coming is so much more. He will be the one to fulfil the promises and bring salvation to the righteous and separate them from the oppressors, just as the ripe grain is separated from the dying chaff surrounding it.

But then another mystery. Luke has built up the excitement, the anticipation, our own eagerness. The expectation that Jesus is about to enter stage left with a fanfare and a mighty drum roll. But none of these.

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.

What an underwhelming introduction after all the build up! But Luke moves swiftly on:

And as he was praying, heaven was opened. ²²The Holy Spirit came to rest on him in the form of a dove. A voice came from heaven. It said, "You are my Son, and I love you. I am very pleased with you.

Although Jesus' arrival on scene is low key for John and the ones he is baptising, we are told that this moment is a private moment for Jesus. What does Jesus hear in this moment? "You are my Son, I love you and I am very pleased with you. Your time has come. It is now. With this baptism, I am commissioning you and placing all my favour on you and my hope in you."

Everyone else has come to hear John and their baptism is conditional on and a symbol of their repentance. For Jesus, the baptism is not about repentance. It is about affirmation, dedication and commissioning him to take the next step forward in his own ministry. This marks the moment when we read that Jesus, fresh from his baptism, fresh from God's confirmation of his love, seeks solitude and space to reflect, to plan and to consider how those words – *You are my Son, I Love you, I am very pleased with you* – should be translated into action as he moves forward in the next stage of his life.

Luke marks this whole transition in Jesus life with the people full of expectation and eager for the coming of the Messiah. Yet Jesus slips into that cauldron of eagerness almost unnoticed, except in the powerful acknowledgement and commissioning he receives from God. Just as his entry is low key, so too his first priority is to seek the quiet and to wrestle in private reflection on the choices open to him. In our eagerness of seeking, we need also to find space for the peace and quiet of our own prayerful contemplation in which we look at our options and to seek God's way, not just the easiest or obvious way.

Prayer

Pray that we may be ready with eagerness and expectation – seeking the place where Jesus is to be found, and being ready to follow.

Pray that in the excitement of our expectation and in the eagerness of our search, we do not miss that it may be in the quiet and unnoticed that he is to be found.

Pray that as we respond to being called and commissioned, we do not choose the easy and obvious path, but take the time to empty ourselves, find real discernment and follow the path which may be more demanding and challenging, but in which we will be supported by the promise of God's love to bless and guide.

Hymn Singing the Faith 708

O God of hope, your prophets spoke
of days when war would cease:
when, taught to see each person's worth,
and faithful stewards of the earth,
we all would live in peace.

We pray that our divided world
may hear their words anew:
then lift for good the curse of war,
let bread with justice bless the poor,
and turn in hope to you.

Earth's fragile web of life demands
our reverence and our care,
lest in our folly, sloth and greed,
deaf both to you and others' need,
we lay our planet bare,

Earth's rich resources give us power
to build or to destroy:
your Spirit urges us to turn
from selfish, fear-bound ways, and learn
his selfless trust and joy,

The prince of Peace is calling us
to shun the way of strife:
he brings us healing through his pain;
our shattered hope is born again
through his victorious life.

Basil Bridge © Kevin Mayhew Ltd

*Set to Repton: the familiar tune of Dear Lord and
Father of Mankind*

Blessing

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

Be blest in your eagerness, be bold in your expectation, be at peace in your contemplation and be enriched by His Spirit. Amen