



Call to Worship: 'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned'. Come Lord Jesus, full of grace and truth. May your light so shine upon us that our darkness is forever transformed.

Hymn: STF 212 'O Come All Ye Faithful'

Listen on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmUVfD16XfU&t=37s>

*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!*

*God of God, Light of Light,
Lo! he abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Very God, begotten, not created,
[Refrain]*

*See how the shepherds, summoned to His cradle,
Leaving their flocks, Draw nigh to gaze;*

Prayer : Lord Jesus, child of the manger, we worship you today. You are the light of all lights and we thank you that your light shone at the beginning of all things - before our world was created - and we thank you that it will shine at the end of all earthly things as the eternal light shining in the Heavenly city.

We thank you that you came down into our world, that your light might shine in the darkness of our world and light the way for us to come to your Father. Help us to live by that light and, as we hear the familiar Christmas message, may it be illuminated for us as never before and fill our hearts and our lives with love and joy and peace. **Amen**

Readings: **Matthew 1:18-25 and John 1: 1-14**

Hymn: 'Away in a Manger (Forever Amen)'

Listen on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=aXXpJeXCJ1w>

*Away in a manger no crib for a bed
The little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head
The stars in the sky look down where He lay
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay*

*The cattle are lowing the baby awakes
The dawn of salvation beginning to break
I love Thee Lord Jesus oh gift from above
The King of the heavens forever with us*

*We too will thither bend our joyful footsteps;
[Refrain]*

*Lo! star led chief-tains, Magi, Christ adoring,
Offer Him incense, gold, and myrrh;
We to the Christ Child bring our hearts' oblations.
[Refrain]*

*Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above:
"Glory to God, in the highest!"
[Refrain]*

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*I worship You Jesus for all of my days
The highest of praises be unto Your name
My God and my Saviour my King and my Friend
Yours is the glory forever amen
Yours is the glory forever amen
Yours is the glory forever amen*

WRITERS: Martin Luther/John Thomas McFarland/James Ramsey Murray/Jonathan Smith/Phil Wickham CCL Licence No. 7138828

Message:

Let me begin by making a confession to you. It's not long after my wife and I have married and it's early in Advent. Our decorations are up. The tree is dressed and among the tree decorations is a host of chocolate soldiers hanging from the branches. I have no idea what soldiers have to do with Christmas although I suspect that Hans Christian Anderson or the Nutcracker might be to blame! And before you ask ... No! They're not organising a census. I'm feeling a bit peckish so, sadly, one of the soldiers is sacrificed to my hunger but what to do about the empty space on the tree? I could decide to carefully rearrange that section of the tree but instead I carefully refold the tinfoil to make it look as though there is still a soldier inside and then, very carefully, I replace it exactly where it has been. Problem solved.

The following day, a second soldier goes the same way as the first, with its empty tinfoil uniform going back on the tree. And another. And another. After that it became a bit of a game to see how far I could go without being rumbled and I can reveal that I managed to go all the way. When my wife eventually came to take one for herself there was nothing on the tree but empties. Don't feel too sad for her or mad at me, though, because there was plenty of alternative chocolate on offer. That's the thing about a modern British Christmas. There is always plenty of chocolate. Probably way too much chocolate. Chocolate stars. Chocolate angels. Chocolate donkeys. And, of course, chocolate soldiers. In many homes, you wonder whether chocolate has supplanted Jesus at the heart of the celebration.

So in our time together I want to reverse that trend and suggest five reasons why Jesus is better than chocolate!

1) You can get sick of chocolate but, if you have him in your life, you'll never get sick of Jesus.

That's not too difficult to put to the test. Eat some chocolate. It tastes great. Then some more. And some more. It won't be very long before your body suggests calling a halt. What, to start with, tasted amazing gets to a point where you really feel can't stomach any more. Keep eating after that and it won't be long before you make yourself sick. That's true of all the material things of this world. They will satisfy but only up to a point. What about Jesus? In Matthew's account of the birth, Jesus is described using a phrase from the Old Testament - Emmanuel - which means God is with us. Jesus brings the presence of God into our lives 24/7. He is full of Heavenly grace and truth. He is full of the love of God. That makes him the greatest friend, guide and supporter that we could ever imagine. Trust me. If you know him in your life there is no point at which you will ever get sick of him.

2) Jesus brings light into the darkness of our world to help us to see clearly.

Here's your interesting fact of the day. Various scientific studies claim to have shown that there are ingredients within chocolate – and particularly dark chocolate – that help our brains function better. Our powers of thinking, reasoning, and decision-making, so the theory goes, will improve with some chocolate inside us.

How does Jesus measure up against that? Here's what John says about Jesus at the beginning of his gospel: *He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.*

So who would you rather have to help you see things more clearly? Something that's come from a cocoa bean? Or someone who's come from Heaven and who shared in the creation of anything and everything you're likely to come into contact with?

3) Chocolate cannot give you a place in God's family

Again we turn to those opening lines from John's gospel:

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Jesus became like us in order that we might become like him. And the Apostle Paul takes it a step further in Romans when he says that we are fully integrated into God's family. He describes us as being heirs and co-heirs with Jesus. Wait a moment, you might say. Don't I remember somewhere where someone entered a chocolate competition and ended up becoming heir to the boss man? Yes, but that was Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and it was fiction. In real life? Not going to happen.

4) Chocolate cannot save you from your sins

There are a huge number of different chocolate bars with a huge number of different names. Among them is the White Knight (now discontinued) from Australia and the Old Faithful from America but neither is able to live up to the claims in the names. They're not going to come to your rescue or stand faithfully by your side. They are, after all, only chocolate bars.

Jesus, on the other hand, has just one name and it means 'God saves' or 'God rescues'. We're back to our reading from Matthew for this one. Joseph has found out that Mary is pregnant and makes plans to break off the engagement. An angel appears to him in a dream and tells him it's OK:

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

5) You can't take chocolate with you when you die

People have tried to take chocolate with them when they died. The first civilisation to master the creation of chocolate was the Mayans and they were often buried with jars of chocolate to take with them to the afterlife. How do we know? Because wherever the Mayans went after they died, the jars of chocolate got left behind. Like all things in this life, you can't take chocolate with you when you die. But you can take Jesus. Or rather, Jesus can take you. Jesus promises that, when the time for our own death comes, he will come and take us to be with him in his Father's house – our family home. Chocolate can't do that for you but Jesus can.

This sermon has been a bit different and a bit tongue in cheek but I hope that something serious has shone through it. I hope it has revealed that within the familiar Christmas readings there is a lot that is very deep and very profound in talking about a Jesus who is 100% with us and for us; who draws us into God's family by dying for our sins and who, one day, will accompany us to our eternal heavenly home.

And I hope – to finish where we started – that everything you unwrap in the Christmas message this year, won't turn out to be empty but will be filled with the presence of Jesus.

Hymn: STF 208 'Let Earth and Heaven Combine'

Listen on YouTube: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1058874227925190>

*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 hath 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.

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Prayer : *'They will call him Immanuel' (which means "God with us").'*

We pray for all those who, at this time, need a strong assurance that God is there with them and that God is their comforter and healer. In particular, we pray for all those we know who are sick; who are suffering; who are sorrowing. We pray that God may bring strength and healing in whatever ways they are needed.

'In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.'

We pray for all those who need the guiding light that only Jesus can truly bring – for our leaders; for those at a crossroads in their lives; for those who feel lost; and for those whose mental health is fragile.

'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

We pray peace upon our world and upon each and every conflict within it - conflicts between nations; conflicts between peoples and conflicts between individuals.

'She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

We pray for all those who are, like the magi, searching for Jesus. May they find what they are looking for and come to know Jesus, the Saviour, who was born to save us from our sins and who has dealt with everything that would separate us from God. We pray, in particular, that in a world marred by darkness, guilt and shame, people may come to know the peace of salvation that only Jesus came to bring.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: STF 202 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COZgBeAvuA8>

*Hark! the herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With the angelic hosts proclaim
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! the herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King"*

*Christ by highest heaven adored
Christ the everlasting Lord
Late in time behold him come
Offspring of a Virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see*

*Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with Man to dwell
Jesus our Emmanuel
Hark! the herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King"*

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace
Hail the Sun of Righteousness
Light and life to all he brings
Risen with healing in his wings
Mild he lays his glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth
Hark! the herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King"*