

*into his courts
with praise...*



A Service of the Word

Sunday 4 January 2026
Epiphany.

A Service of the Word for Sunday morning

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INTRODUCTION

*“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they left for their own country by another road.”*

Matthew 2:12.



THE CONFESSION

The grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all.
Though we have grieved him, yet he will heal us if we confess our
sins in penitence and faith.

**Almighty God,
I confess that I have sinned against you
in thought, word and deed;
I have not loved you with all my heart;
I have not loved my neighbours as myself.
Have mercy upon me,
cleanse me from my sins,
and help me to overcome my faults,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Receive God's forgiveness

May the Father forgive us
By the death of His Son
And strengthen us
To live in the power of the Spirit
All our days. **Amen.**

PRAISE

O Lord, open my lips...
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
Give me the joy of your saving help...
and sustain me with your life-giving Spirit.

THE COLLECT

Creator of the heavens, who led the Magi by a star to worship the Christ-child: guide and sustain us, that we may find our journey's end in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

*Suggested hymn to sing or read **Brightest and best of the sons of the morning.***

THE WORD OF GOD.

Psalm 72:10–15

The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute; ♦
the kings of Sheba and Seba shall bring gifts.
All kings shall fall down before him; ♦
all nations shall do him service.
For he shall deliver the poor that cry out, ♦
the needy and those who have no helper.
He shall have pity on the weak and poor; ♦
he shall preserve the lives of the needy.
He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, ♦
and dear shall their blood be in his sight.
Long may he live;
unto him may be given gold from Sheba; ♦
may prayer be made for him continually
and may they bless him all the day long.

Isaiah 60:1–6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Ephesians 3:1–12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see

what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Suggested hymn to sing or read As with gladness men of old.

GOSPEL

Matthew 2:1–12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

REFLECTION – Truth will out.

William Norman Ewer was an English poet, and probably also a Russian spy in the 1920s. He is best known (and possibly only remembered) for a very short poem:

'How odd of God to choose the Jews.'

He was suspected of being anti-Semitic, but maintained that he was just being witty. Now hastening to say that I am not being anti-Semitic either, I just want to stick with that couplet, 'How odd of God to choose the Jews,' because Ewer sums up in these eight words what theologians have taken thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of words to describe. It is what they call 'the scandal of particularity.' (Good phrase that – drop it into a conversation and sound knowledgeable.) And what the scandal of particularity means is that out of all the areas of the world, out of every year of history, out of every tribe or nation – why did the Son of God have to be born as a Jew in first century Palestine? 'How odd...'

It seems an unlikely time and place. So the first point to make is that if the Son of God was going to experience genuine human life: to be born, to grow up, to work for his living, even to die, then it had to happen at some place and some particular time. He could not experience human life in a disembodied, theoretical way. It had to be **real**. But why then, why there?

Israel's glory days of the great Kings David and Solomon were a thousand years in the past, and for nearly 600 years the Jewish people had been part of someone else's empire: Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and in Jesus' time, Roman. One thing marked the Jews out from other peoples of that time: most of the nations believed in many gods, the Jews in only one. And the gods of those other nations were not really troubled about how people lived their lives. You offered them sacrifices for fertility in your crops – or your wives – or for victory in battle, but in between those sacrifices the gods were not bothered what sort of person you were, how you behaved. In fact according to the legends the way the gods behaved wasn't anything to be proud of either. This is in stark contrast to the God of the Jews, who really was interested in things like morality and justice. So perhaps it was not so odd of God to choose the Jews after all?

But coming back to the birth of Jesus, which has been celebrated at this time of year since the fourth century, we might expect – as the wise men did in today's gospel story – that Jesus would be found in the family of the king or the High Priest in Jerusalem.

But born in little Bethlehem? Living 'up north' in Nazareth, working as a carpenter? Not shielded in any way, but experiencing ordinary everyday life? Odd!

But where or when else might he have been born? Rome perhaps? If Joseph had been, say, an official in the court of the Emperor, Jesus would have been better placed to influence the whole Empire. Or perhaps better if he had waited for the Renaissance, that great flourishing of music and art: much better ways of getting his message across. But if getting the message across was so important, perhaps he ought to have been born in the latter part of the twentieth century. By the time he was grown up he would have all the advantages of social media, 24-hour TV, news going around the world in seconds. He could have been a celebrity!

But no – probably better that Jesus lived when and where he did, and his story was passed on in the lives of ordinary people who found that his message rang true. God the Father knew what he was doing, working through the history of the Jewish people to prepare the way for the coming of his Son. It is amazing really how the basics of the gospel have persisted and adapted to be re-told and believed, in different cultures around the world, and the nativity story is a prime example of this.

I love the carol 'In the bleak mid-winter' with its image of Mary cherishing her baby in the midst of all the activity going on around her, and its last verse, asking, 'What can I give him?' But 'Snow had fallen, snow on snow?' In Bethlehem? More recently, in the 1950s, the composer Gerald Finzi has combined words by the poet Robert Bridges with words from Luke's gospel in his choral work, '*In terra pax*,' which imagines the nativity story taking place on a snowy Christmas Eve in rural Gloucestershire. We don't know Jesus' actual date of birth – there is some evidence to suggest it might have been in September or October, during the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles – and the date in December was only fixed by the Church in Rome in the fourth century. But given that we **do** celebrate Christmas in December and January, then it was natural to re-imagine the story in a British winter.

A while ago I came across a book of Nativity pictures from around the world, and was struck by a picture from Sudan. Mary is sitting with the baby on her lap, as you might expect. But Mary has big loop ear-rings and three metal rings around her neck. There are two other women and two men in the picture, presumably one of them being Joseph, but they are all in traditional Sudanese dress – and all black.

They see the Nativity in their own setting. In the same book was a picture from China, with Mary, Joseph and the baby leaving Bethlehem – in a punt, with a man in a typical 'coolie' hat standing in the stern with a punt pole. In a land of river estuaries and paddy fields, the artist imagines the journey by boat, not by donkey. This adaptability of the story is one of its strengths. There is a carol from the Huron tribe of native Americans which portrays the wise men as tribal chiefs. So the basic story doesn't change, but it is dressed in a way that resonates with its audience.

Even Luke and Matthew, writing some 70 years after the birth of Jesus, tell the story in different ways. Luke chooses to give the historical setting, telling us who was Emperor, who was Governor, and combines this with details like the journey to Bethlehem, the visit of the shepherds, and then the visit of Joseph and Mary to Jerusalem when Jesus was 40 days old – a regular and important part of Jewish family life which we shall mark in February (Candlemas). Matthew prefers to show how the birth of Jesus was in fulfilment of important prophecies about the Messiah, and how his birth has significance for all the nations, as represented by the visit of the Wise Men. Not long after I began ministry, I was advised never to mix Luke's version and Matthew's in the same service, but to let them stand in their own right. So I tend to feature Luke at Christmas and save Matthew for Epiphany. But in fact the basic truths are there in both accounts: God's plan from way back in history, his choice of Mary, the birth in Bethlehem and growing up in Nazareth, the signs in the birth narratives that point towards Jesus' adult ministry: it is all there, just presented in different ways. Dress it in the clothes of different cultures, yes, but the truth is still there at its heart. The gospel story is very resilient – it must be, to have travelled around the world and been told and re-told for 2,000 years. Thank God!

Jonathan Falkner.

*Suggested hymn to sing or read **In the bleak midwinter.***



THE CREED

All I believe in God the Father,
 whose loving care is the pattern for family life.
 I believe in Jesus, the Son of God,
 who lives in my heart through faith,
 and fills me with his love.
 I believe in God the Holy Spirit,
 who strengthens me with power from on high.
 I believe in one God;
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A time of quiet prayer for

- *The universal Church - Bishops, synods and all leaders church*
- *The leaders of the nations*
- *The natural world and the resources of the earth*

Loving God I see the news and I am afraid. Violence is spiralling out of control. I don't know what to think or feel. The temptation to fall into hatred, or despair feels very close at hand.

Help me to remember that nothing in all creation can separate me from your love that I know in Jesus. May your perfect love for me cast out my fear and free me to discern what is mine to do amidst the chaos of this suffering world.

Amen.

Finishing with the South Calder Mission Community prayer...

Heavenly Father we thank you for the life of your Church in this place, and in all the villages of the South Calder Mission Community;

for all who have served and worshipped you in years gone by, for all who make up your family in our churches today, for the faith we have in common, and for the people and traditions which make each church unique.

By your Spirit, guide and equip us, that together we might find new ways to reach out to our local community, to show your love to our neighbours, and to encourage them to follow the Lord Jesus in their lives. Father, we offer ourselves to your service. In the unity of the Holy Spirit, And in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

and the Lord's prayer...

Our Father, who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come;
 thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 as we forgive those who trespass against us.
 And lead us not into temptation;
 but deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom,
 the power and the glory,
 for ever and ever. Amen.

THE CONCLUSION

Suggested hymn to sing or read ***In Christ there is no East or West.***

The following prayer is said

**Be with me, Lord, as I finish my prayer today.
May my lips always speak the truth;
may my eyes which have read your word
see only what is good;
and may my life as well as my worship
be always pleasing in your sight,
for the glory of your name. Amen.**

And now may the Lord who brought us to birth by his Spirit,
strengthen us for the Christian life.
May the Lord who provides for all our needs
sustain us day by day.
May the Lord whose steadfast love is constant as a mother's care,
send us out to live and work for others.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with us and remain with us always.
Amen.
So now may I go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Links for the hymns

Brightest and best of the sons of the morning

<https://youtu.be/8Q5A4TctOn0>

As with gladness men of old.

<https://youtu.be/UB8rKNrIpDQ>

In the bleak midwinter.

<https://youtu.be/xAzQIS4-MpY>

In Christ there is no East or West.

<https://youtu.be/zpEycHpPLM8>