

St Peter's Scottish Episcopal Church, Kirkcaldy



Thursday 24th December 2020, Christmas Eve Service (Zoom at 7pm)

Introit Hymn: It came upon the midnight clear

Welcome: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Collect for Purity: **Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Gloria: **Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth. Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father, we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory. Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us; you are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer. For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

Collect: Eternal God, this holy night is radiant with the brilliance of your one true light. As we have known the revelation of that light on earth, so bring us to see the splendour of your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Collect SPB: O Lord Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee: Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

First reading: Isaiah 9. 2-7

Second reading: Titus 2. 11-14

Gradual hymn: While shepherds watched their flocks by night

Gospel acclamation: Alleluia! Alleluia! I bring you news of great joy: today a saviour has been born to us, Christ the Lord. Alleluia!

Gospel: Luke 2. 1-20

Homily:

Mary's time had come. After the long journey, the road to Bethlehem, and the days of worry before that – what would Joseph say when he found out she was pregnant? How did this happen anyway? But Joseph had stood by her, and now the time had finally come, in a strange city, with no family there to help, and the barn would have to do. There was no room in the inn, but how could they have afforded that anyway? Money was hard to come by. The baby at last was coming, and Mary was terrified.

And the shepherds, too, were terrified. Like Mary and Joseph, they weren't sleeping inside that night: They were out in the fields, and it was cold. And suddenly this Angel of the Lord was confronting them, and this glory of the Lord was nearly blinding them, and this multitude from heaven was declaring peace on earth. There hadn't been peace for a long time; how was this baby lying in a manger going to bring peace now? It didn't make sense.

We have heard this story before, and we are probably not terrified tonight, as Mary and the shepherds were. But maybe we should be. Because if Christmas really comes, the way we say we want it to, things will have to change. The world will be reborn. The Kingdom of God will come on earth, as in heaven.

Still, like Mary, we have been waiting, and praying, and hoping for this night. When the Angel Gabriel told her she would bear God's Son into the world, Mary's response was, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mary agreed to do this, despite the strange and unusual circumstances. She knew people would think the wrong thing and look down on her. She knew that Joseph might not understand. Even knowing how hard this would be, she said yes.

We also have a choice. We are not here merely to remember what happened so long ago on a cold night in Bethlehem. Like Mary, God is asking us: Will you bear Christ into the world? Will you carry Jesus in your heart?

Our road is different from Mary's, but it is challenging in its own way. A new baby always changes things. Your life is no longer your own. If you agree to let Jesus be born again tonight, your life will change, maybe in ways you don't expect. So be careful how you answer.

The Christmas story can so easily be lost under a sentimental blanket of snow, with cows gently lowing and stars brightly shining. This is true with the carols we sing, too. They are so familiar that we sometimes miss the real meaning.

For example: "It came upon the midnight clear." The really interesting stuff in this carol happens in verse 3. This is true of most Christmas carols, actually: The real theology happens two or three verses in. Here's the third verse of "It came upon a midnight clear":

"Yet, with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;
beneath the heavenly hymn have rolled two thousand years of wrong;
and warring humankind hears not the tidings which they bring;
O hush the noise and cease your strife and hear the angels sing."

And here's the second verse of "In the bleak mid-winter":

"Our God – heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign."

Christina Rossetti, who wrote this carol, is making a bold theological claim in this verse. When God comes – if God comes – heaven and earth will "flee away." Heaven and earth as we know them now – everything we

know, everything we see – will simply stop. Vanish. And then what? What comes next? Well, what comes next – what happens when God comes – is what Rossetti wants us to think about.

Perhaps the best example of Christmas carol theology is “O little town of Bethlehem.” The first couple of verses are sweet, almost cloying – all those “Christmas angels” and “silent stars.” But Phillips Brooks, the famous 19th-century preacher who wrote this carol, knew what he was doing. He has given us a perfect sermon in miniature. Here is the last line:

“O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.”

The carol has gotten rather serious by this fifth verse. “Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today” – not so sweet, is it? It may be what we need – it may even be what we want, what we are praying for – but it doesn’t sound easy.

“Cast out our sin” brings to mind some lines from the Magnificat, the Song that Mary sings after she hears from Gabriel that she is pregnant:

“[God] has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.”

There’s some resonance between God’s tearing our sin from us and casting it out, as in the carol, and God casting down the mighty from their thrones, sending the rich away, empty. Being sent away empty isn’t a punishment, you see – it’s a blessing. If we allow God to cast out our sin – if we allow God to empty us out – then we will be blessed indeed, just as Mary was.

And what is it, exactly, that we need to be rid of this year? What is the sin that needs casting out, the thing that’s getting in the way of God being born in us? Our desire to be important? To have all the right things? To have more than we need?

What is it that occupies your heart this Christmas? Maybe it’s sadness, frustration, anger? The feeling that you’re not good enough or smart enough or kind enough? Or maybe you’re lonely or afraid?

Whatever is in there, God wants to be in our heart, too. And if we let God in, even just a little bit: Watch out! Cast out our sin and enter in. He has sent the rich away, empty.

It is only after we have been emptied – of all the ridiculous things, all the needless stuff that gets in the way of God’s love – only when we are emptied of these worries, these desires, are we ready to be filled with the love of God. Only when we are empty can Christ be born in us. Only when we are empty will Christmas come. We can sing the carols and put out the crèche, but unless we are willing to be emptied out, there won’t be any place for God to live.

This is the inside work, the thing that must happen inside our hearts, in order for the outside work to move forward. And the outside work is the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Heaven and earth shall flee away, you see, when he comes to reign. We are being asked to bear God into the world, just as Mary did. And just like Mary, we know that this is not going to be easy, and it’s going to change everything. Are we brave enough to do this, knowing that if God’s kingdom really comes, our lives change forever? Are we willing to be cast down, emptied out, so that God may be raised up?

This labor, this bringing about the Kingdom of God, will not be easy. But this is Christmas; the time has come, and our call is to bear Jesus into the world, just as Mary bore him so long ago.

We are called to put flesh on the values of God’s kingdom, to put hands and feet and brains and shoulders to work for peace and justice and love.

Come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel. Be born in us today.

Merry Christmas. **Amen.**

Nicene Creed: We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God, begotten, not made,
of one substance with the Father. Through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father.
With the Father and the Son, he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Intercessions: *Composed and prayed on behalf of the congregation by a member of the Intercessors Group*

Good and gracious God, on this holy night you gave us your Son, the Lord of the universe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Saviour of all, lying in a manger. On this holy night draw us into the mystery of your love. Join our voices with the heavenly host, that we may sing your glory on high. Give us a place among the shepherds, that we may find the one for whom we have waited, Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God forever and ever.

Amen

On this holy night in which God joins heaven and earth, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Let us pray for the Church around the world as it celebrates the birth of Christ. Bless all those who are entrusted with Christian ministry that your Word might be proclaimed with truth and courage across our world. Bestow your wisdom on all who govern, that in honouring the earth and its diverse races, cultures, and religions, we may celebrate the light of this holy night.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Grant reconciliation to those besought with conflict and violence, that they may live in the peace of this holy night.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Let us pray for all who are cold, hungry, or alone this night. Embrace with your tender care all who wander alone or have no place to lay their head, they may experience the hope of this holy night.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Let us pray for all who are anxious, depressed, or ill. Draw near to those who find this season a source of pain or grief, and to all who are suffering or sick, especially those we remember in our own hearts ... that they may feel the comfort of this holy night.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Let us pray for parents, families, and children. Strengthen families in the bonds of love and commitment, that our homes might be places of joy and peace.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Let us pray for ourselves and for the blessings of Christmas. Open our hearts to your presence, that we may be transformed by the new birth of this holy night.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Let us give thanks for all our loved ones from whom we are parted this Christmas. Give us grace to entrust those who have passed before us into tender loving care, that we might join with them in singing your praises this holy night.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

May God grant unto us whatever we need that we might serve him in showing his love and compassion to our world, allowing the light of God to illuminate the dark places with grace and truth. **Amen**

Confession

and Absolution:

God is love and we are his children. There is no room for fear in love.
We love because he loved us first. Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith.

Silence

**God our Father, we confess to you
and to our fellow members in the Body of Christ
that we have sinned in thought, word and deed,
and in what we have failed to do.**

We are truly sorry.

**Forgive us our sins,
and deliver us from the power of evil.**

**For the sake of your Son who died for us,
Jesus Christ, our Lord.**

(May) God, who is both power and love, forgive us and free us from our sins,
heal and strengthen us by his Spirit and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Peace:

We meet in Christ's Name let us share his peace.

Offertory hymn:

A great and mighty wonder

Communion Prayer:

God of infinite mercy. We thank you for Jesus our Saviour who feeds his people and gives them eternal life. Though we cannot consume the gifts of bread and wine we thank you that we do receive Christ's saving presence, the forgiveness of sins and all other benefits of his passion. Grant that we may continue for ever in the risen and ascended life of our Saviour. Amen.

(This prayer is said during the online Provincial service).

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.**

Hymn:

O little town of Bethlehem

Closing Prayer:

**This, tonight, is the meeting place of heaven and earth.
For this, tonight, is the stable in which God keeps his appointment to meet his people.
Not many high are here, not many holy, not many innocent children, not many worldly-wise; not all familiar faces, not all frequent visitors.
But, if tonight, only strangers met, that would be enough.
For Bethlehem was not the hub of the universe, nor was the stable a platform for famous folk.
In an out of the way place which folk never thought to visit – there God keeps his promise; there God sends his son.**

Blessing:

Christ, who by his incarnation gathered into one all things earthly and heavenly, fill you with his joy and peace; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Dismissal:

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Recessional hymn:

O come all ye faithful