

Carols by Candlelight
20th December 2020
6.30pm

Hello and welcome to carols by candlelight from Bowthorpe Church. My name is Rev. Mark Elvin. This has been a difficult year for many people across the world, and this Christmas may well be different from any other. So, we pray that through the carols and readings you will gain a some hope for the days ahead, and that you will come close to God today as you prepare for Christmas. Let's prepare our hearts to come close to God as we sing together, O come all ye faithful.

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:

O come, let us adore Him...

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;
Glory to God in the highest:

O come, let us adore Him...

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, Born this happy morning,
Jesus, to Thee be glory given;
Word of the Father Now in flesh appearing:

O come, let us adore Him...

We begin with some words from the prophet Isaiah, who seven centuries before the coming of Christ, said: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end' (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Let's pray.

God our Father, as we recall the story of that first Christmas, may we draw close to you and know your peace in our lives. In these dark and difficult times, may we come into the light and peace of your presence; through Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

We sing our next carol, Joy to the world.

JOY TO THE WORLD the Lord has come;
Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing!

Joy to the earth! the Saviour reigns;
let us our songs employ.
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy!

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
The wonders of His love,
The wonders of His love,
The wonders, the wonders of His love.

Eight hundred years after Isaiah spoke his words, a young unmarried girl received an unexpected visitor. Luke's gospel tells us what happened.

Luke 1:26-38 (Dave)

`God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin who lived in Nazareth, a town in Galilee. She was engaged to marry a man named Joseph from the family of David. Her name was Mary. The angel came to her and said, "Greetings! The Lord has blessed you and is with you." But Mary was very confused by what the angel said. Mary wondered, "What does this mean?"

The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary, because God is pleased with you. Listen! You will become pregnant. You will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and people will call him the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of King David, his ancestor. He will rule over the people of Jacob for ever. His kingdom will never end."

Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen? I am a virgin!" The angel said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you. The baby will be holy. He will be called the Son of God. Now listen! Elizabeth, your relative, is very old. But she is pregnant with a son. Everyone thought she could not have a baby, but she has been pregnant for six months. For nothing is impossible with God!" Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said!" Then the angel went away.

If the angel's words were true, then Mary faced a serious situation. An unmarried woman becoming pregnant was in danger of being stoned to death. The `good news' that the angel spoke about may not seem such good news for this young girl. Despite being greatly troubled, Mary accepted the angel's words and remained obedient.

ANGELS, FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY,

Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story,
Now proclaim Messiah's birth:

Come and worship

Christ, the new-born King.

Come and worship

Worship Christ, the new-born King.

Shepherds, in the field abiding,
Watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with man is now residing,
Yonder shines the infant-light:

Sages, leave your contemplations,
Brighter visions beam afar;
Seek the great desire of nations,
Ye have seen His natal star:

Saints, before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord descending
In His temple shall appear:

Interview with Helen Blake (Connecting Bowthorpe)

Only the strongest confidence in God could sustain Mary through such an ordeal. Many people have been going through an ordeal this year. To help people in need, the Church set up a food parcel scheme in March. This community group is now known as Connecting Bowthorpe, and is staffed by a group of volunteers who distribute food to those in need locally. With me is Helen, one of the volunteers.

Q. Helen, do tell us why you are part of this food scheme.

Q. How many families are you currently helping? (How many parcels have gone out since March?)

Q. What are your hopes for people this Christmas and into the New Year?

Q. Do you have a carol you'd like to hear today?

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER,

frosty wind made moan;

Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.

Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow;

In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain,
Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable-place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air.
But His mother only, in her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Belovèd with a kiss.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him— Give my heart.

Our next reading tells us of the birth of Jesus in an occupied land, where the Roman empire ruled.

Luke 2:1-7 (Cathy)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while^[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

The dramatic impact of the birth of the Saviour of the world is understated in Luke's gospel with the simple phrase: "she gave birth to her firstborn, a son." The birth of Mary's child was hardly noticed. But God was not silent on this most holy night. Over distant fields, the night sky burst into light as the good news of Christ's birth was announced by the angel of the Lord.

We sing our next carol, a modern carol called 'It was on a starry night.'

HOLY CHILD, how still You lie,
Safe the manger, soft the hay;
Faint upon the eastern sky
Breaks the dawn of Christmas Day.
Holy Child, whose birthday brings
Shepherds from their field and fold,
Angel choirs and eastern kings,
Myrrh and frankincense and gold:

Holy Child, what gift of grace
From the Father freely willed!
In Your infant form we trace
All God's promises fulfilled.
Holy Child, whose human years
Span like ours delight and pain;
One in human joys and tears,
One in all but sin and stain:

Holy Child, so far from home,
All the lost to seek and save:
To what dreadful death You come,
To what dark and silent grave!
Holy Child, before whose name
Powers of darkness faint and fall;
Conquered death and sin and shame –
Jesus Christ is Lord of all!

Holy Child, how still You lie!
Safe the manger, soft the hay;
Clear upon the eastern sky
Breaks the dawn of Christmas Day.

The first to receive the good news about the birth of God's Son were simple shepherds. Shepherds were some of the lowest members of society, considered untrustworthy. Yet it is to such people that God first brings the news of the Messiah's birth.

Luke 2:8-18 (Linda)

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they told everyone what had been told to them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

The angel announced the good news to lowly shepherds. Like a dam bursting open, a whole company of heaven's angels burst into song, praising God. Let us do the same as we sing the calypso carol 'See him lying on a bed of straw'.

SEE HIM LYING ON A BED OF STRAW

A draughty stable with an open door;
Mary cradling the babe she bore;
The Prince of glory is His name.

*O now carry me to Bethlehem,
To see the Lord appear to men;
Just as poor as was the stable then,
The Prince of glory when He came.*

Star of silver, sweep across the skies,
Show where Jesus in the manger lies;
Shepherds, swiftly from your stupor rise
To see the Saviour of the world.

O now carry me to Bethlehem...

Angels, sing again the song you sang,
Bring God's glory to the heart of man;
Sing that Bethlehem's little baby can
Be salvation to the soul.

*O now carry me to Bethlehem,
To see the Lord appear to men;
Just as poor as was the stable then,
The Prince of glory when He came.*

Mine are riches, from Thy poverty,
From Thine innocence, eternity;
Mine, forgiveness by Thy death for me,
Child of sorrow for my joy.

O now carry me to Bethlehem...

Matthew's gospel records for us that Magi from the East came looking for the new-born king. Like us, they too had come to worship King Jesus. We hear their story now.

Matthew 2:1-12 (?)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."^[b]

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

SHORT TALK

What will Christmas mean to you this year? Someone said to me the other day that it's going to be a very ordinary Christmas. What they meant was that nothing much would happen. No parties, no relatives, few presents. Just ordinary, on their own. This is not so different from the first Christmas. It seemed like an ordinary night, a young woman giving birth to a child. But many young women give birth at night. What made this birth so special? After all, when Jesus was born there were no parties, unless you count the shepherds going round excitedly telling everyone about what had happened and who had been born. There were no relatives visiting, unless you count the Wise Men who travelled a great distance to see the new-born king of the Jews. There were few presents, only gold, frankincense and myrrh. Yes, it was an ordinary Christmas, yet it was also an extraordinary Christmas, and the three gifts let us into why it was an extraordinary Christmas. These three gifts were there to tell us something about who this baby was. As we sing the carol 'We three kings' listen out for their meaning.

WE THREE KINGS of Orient are bearing gifts we travel afar
Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star

*O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*

Born a king on Bethlehem plain, gold I bring to crown him again
King for ever, ceasing never, over us all to reign

O star of wonder...

Frankincense for Jesus have I, God on earth yet priest on high
Prayer and praising all men raising, worship is earth's reply

O star of wonder...

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume tells of his death and Calvary's
gloom;

Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in a stone cold tomb

O star of wonder...

Glorious now, behold him arise, King and God and sacrifice!
Heaven sings 'Alleluia', 'Alleluia' the earth replies.

Gold was for a king. These Wise Men had been looking for the newly born king of the Jews (Matthew 2:2). And so they brought gold, a gift fit for a king. At the end of the Bible it announces Jesus as the King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19.16). He is the Lord of heaven and earth. There has never been a greater king, but a king like no other. The next gift tells us why.

Frankincense was used by priests as they offered prayers to God. A priest is someone who connects heaven and earth and brings us close to God. Jesus, the king of heaven, came and made it possible for us to connect with God, and come close to him. He didn't do this through wonderful prayers or elaborate ceremonies but through himself. He is the one who connects us with God. That's the message of the frankincense. How did he do this? How did Jesus connect us to God?

Myrrh was the third gift brought to Jesus. It was something they used in ancient times when someone died. They would put myrrh on the body. When the Wise Men gave myrrh it was a future sign that this king will connect us to God through his own death.

Jesus' death was the most important death in history because through it, Jesus made it possible for us to know God personally. I opened my life to Jesus 38 years ago, and it was the best decision I ever made. If you want your Christmas to be the best ever, despite all the things we are going through, despite all the restrictions, then invite Jesus into your life. How do you do that? You pray, simply saying in your own words something like, 'Jesus, please come into my life. Please forgive me for all the wrong I've done. Amen.' It's that simple. As the carol says, 'Where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.' Imagine... the babe born in Bethlehem coming to your Christmas celebration. Now that would make it the most special Christmas.

Let's pray.

PRAYER: Loving God, we thank you that you gave your Son Jesus as a gift for us all, to connect us to you. We thank you for Christmas when we celebrate his birth. Will you come and bring us your gift of hope at this time. Lord Jesus, come into our lives. Amen.

We sing the carol 'O little town of Bethlehem.'

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth;
For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming; but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.

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 Immanuel!

PRAYERS

Lord, your word says you are Immanuel – God with us. This Christmas we pray for all who feel isolated and alone, and for those who feel they don't matter. May they discover the truth that your love is able to break through the isolation. We pray for families who will be apart.

Lord, your word says you came to bring hope to a troubled world. This Christmas we pray for all who are working, especially those working hard to keep us safe. We pray for those who cannot work because of ill-health, and for those who have lost their jobs because of the coronavirus.

Lord, your word says you came to bring good news to the poor. This Christmas we pray for all who are reliant on food banks and voluntary donations. We pray for teams like Connecting Bowthorpe and for the wonderful work they are doing through these difficult days. We pray that one day we may live in a world where all have dignity and hope.

Lord, your word says that you came to proclaim freedom for prisoners. This Christmas we pray for all who are in prison, who are struggling with boredom, guilt and fear. We pray for political prisoners and those imprisoned for their faith. May they have hope this Christmas that they are not alone. We pray that all prisoners may discover the freedom that is found in Jesus.

Lord, your word says you came to bind up the broken-hearted. This Christmas we pray for all who have lost loved ones and who are grieving. Give them strength to cope with the difficulty and pain of grief. Help us this Christmas to all live in the knowledge that you are preparing a place with you for those who love you. So, help us not to be afraid but to place our trust in you now and always. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name
Your kingdom come
Your will be done on earth as in heaven
Give us today our daily bread
Forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us
Lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
For the kingdom, the power and the glory
are yours now and for ever. Amen.

We now sing our final carol, Hark! The herald angels sing

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 host proclaim, 'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'
Hark! the herald angels sing: 'Glory to the new-born 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 Immanuel.
Hark! the herald angels sing: 'Glory to the new-born 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 men 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 new-born King.'

CLOSING PRAYER

Loving God, you came among us in your Son Jesus on that first Christmas. Be with each one of us this coming Christmas and in the coming year ahead. In Jesus' name. Amen.

BLESSING

And now may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you and all whom you love, now and for evermore. Amen.

Happy Christmas!