

Welcome and Notices

Lighting of the Candles - Music: The Holly and the Ivy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6o7iJd31ft4>

The holly and the ivy
Are dancing in a ring
Round the berry-bright red candles
And the white and shining king

And two is for the prophets
And for the light they bring
They are candles in the darkness
All alight for Christ the King

And four for Mother Mary
'I cannot see the way,
But you promise me a baby.
I believe you. I obey.'

And one is for God's people
In every age and day
They are watching for his coming
We believe and we obey

And three for John the Baptist
He calls on us to sing
'O prepare the way for Jesus Christ,
He is coming, Christ the King,

And Christ is in the centre,
For this is his birthday,
With the shining nights of Christmas
Singing: 'He has come today!'

Call to Worship

We are here today, to remember the time when Jesus came to this earth, and was born as a defenceless baby, humbly, amidst farm animals.

Jesus put himself from the first with the ordinary things of life, and with ordinary people; people like us.

That presence continues with us now; so let us worship God; we sing to his praise

HYMN StF 212 O Come, all ye faithful <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzgJ0LHdU14>

- 1 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!*
- 2 True God of true God,
Light of Light eternal,
lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father,
begotten, not created:
- 3 See how the shepherds,
summoned to his cradle,
leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;
we too will thither
bend our joyful footsteps:

- 4 Lo, star-led chieftains,
Magi, Christ adoring,
offer him incense, gold, and myrrh;
we to the Christ-child
bring our hearts' oblations:
- 5 Sing, choirs of angels,
sing in exultation,
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above:
'Glory to God
in the highest:'
- 6 Yea, Lord, we greet thee,
born this happy morning,
Jesus, to thee be glory given:
Word of the Father,
now in flesh appearing:

Latin, 18th century, possibly by
John Francis Wade (c.1711-1786)
and others

Prayers of Approach

Dear God, on this of all days, we bring you our thanks, our profound thanks, for all you have done for us, and especially for your great gift to the world, in the birth of Jesus, who was born to live with us, suffer for us, and to redeem us.

How can we find adequate words for this great gift. Week in, week out, we try to be appreciative in our prayers; sometimes we do better than others, but how can we do justice to this gift? We cannot know what it has cost you to participate in the suffering of the world, and we have to fall back on the things we do know: what it means to have a child, how we feel

protective towards our own children, how their suffering cuts us like a knife, how we dread any danger that might befall them; how we want the best for them.

So, the whole story of Jesus wrenches at our humanity. And that starts today, at his birth. Here, in this country, in the present age, we are used to care being more freely available; how we would hate to be in that situation of uncertainty and exposure, dependent on minimum hospitality, on being allowed to share space with the animals.

Lord, we apologize for all those times when our own response to the needs of others has been minimal, when we have given not in relation to those needs, but only to our own convenience. May our generosity never be limited to giving the things we do not need ourselves, but instead may our eyes be open to the real needs of all around us, so that we may welcome in all who need our shelter and protection, so that in our houses and flats, and in this holy house, all may be helped and welcomed. We cannot forget Jesus's own emphasis on helping the weakest. This day, when we remember his fragile start in the world, with all its danger, discomfort and humility, let us resolve to try and live up to his example.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

And now, we say the prayer Jesus himself taught us.

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.

Junior Church Talk

This is Thwaite's normal day: sleep, food, walk, sleep, wandering around and greeting those about, sleep, walk, food, bit of sleep, bit of joining in with family life, sleep. I said "Christmas is coming what would you like for Christmas?" "Normally I get a bone" said Thwaite. "Is that alright?" "Certainly you can have a bone, it will be a pleasure." "That's good" he said. I asked "Is there anything you would like to do, bearing in mind what you normally do?" "Well" he said "I would like a bit more of everything: a bit more sleep, a bit more walking and a bit more food." So I said "You cannot really have more of everything, because it won't fit in the day." "Oh. Well I do like meeting people when I go out for a walk," I said "That's the difficult bit really. Because in these times we are not supposed to meet up with other people, because of disease, you might be ill." "Oh" said Thwaite "I don't know what to do about that, but I think it's a bit miserable not to meet people 'cos I like to see my friends." Now Thwaite's friends are Mac, a Cairn terrier, and Eric, who is a Shetland pony, and some other dogs, he doesn't really know their names, but he meets them on his walks. "Well" he said "can I see my friends?" I said "Probably not as much as usual, You can see Eric the pony and you can see Mac as he lives with Jane's mother and father." "Oh" he said "that will be alright. We'll have a nice cosy time." It is what the Prime Minister calls "a little Christmas". He said "That's fine, I like having a little Christmas." So I think that's the message for all of us isn't it? It's a little Christmas this year but we can enjoy it, if we try. We just have to postpone some of the activity and some of the meeting of other people until later. "And then" said Thwaite "we are going to see them lots and lots. Aren't we?"

Happy Christmas!

HYMN StF 213 O little town of Bethlehem https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMmqN7GUV_8

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| <p>1 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.</p> <p>2 O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
and peace to all the earth !
For Christ is born of Mary ;
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.</p> | <p>3 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.</p> <p>4 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 !</p> |
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Phillips Brooks (1835-1893)

Reading John 1:1-14

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Reading Titus 3:4-7

⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

HYMN StF 204 In the bleak midwinter <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qd38OWOXk40>

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| <p>1 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.</p> <p>2 Heaven cannot hold him,
nor the earth sustain ;
heav'n and earth shall flee away
when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter
a stable-place sufficed
God, the Lord Almighty,
Jesus Christ.</p> | <p>3 Angels and archangels
may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim
throngèd the air —
but his mother only,
in her maiden bliss,
worshipped the Belovèd
with a kiss.</p> <p>4 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.</p> |
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Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830–1894)

Sermon: Papa Panov's Special Christmas

It was Christmas Eve and although it was still afternoon, lights had begun to appear in the shops and houses of the little Russian village, for the short winter day was nearly over. Excited children scurried indoors and now only muffled sounds of chatter and laughter escaped from closed shutters.

Old Papa Panov, the village shoemaker, stepped outside his shop to take one last look around. The sounds of happiness, the bright lights and the faint but delicious smells of Christmas cooking reminded him of past Christmas times when his wife had still been alive and his own children little. Now they had gone. His usually cheerful face, with the little laughter wrinkles behind the round steel spectacles, looked sad now. But he went back indoors with a firm step, put up the shutters and set a pot of coffee to heat on the charcoal stove. Then, with a sigh, he settled in his big armchair.

Papa Panov did not often read, but tonight he pulled down the big old family Bible and, slowly tracing the lines with one forefinger, he read again the Christmas story. He read how Mary and Joseph, tired by their journey to Bethlehem, found no room for them at the inn, so that Mary's little baby was born in the cowshed.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" exclaimed Papa Panov, "if only they had come here! I would have given them my bed and I could have covered the baby with my patchwork quilt to keep him warm."

He read on about the wise men who had come to see the baby Jesus, bringing him splendid gifts. Papa Panov's face fell. "I have no gift that I could give him," he thought sadly.

Then his face brightened. He put down the Bible, got up and stretched his long arms to the shelf high up in his little room. He took down a small, dusty box and opened it. Inside was a perfect pair of tiny leather shoes. Papa Panov smiled with satisfaction. Yes, they were as good as he had remembered - the best shoes he had ever made. "I should give him those," he decided, as he gently put them away and sat down again.

He was feeling tired now, and the further he read the sleepier he became. The print began to dance before his eyes so that he closed them, just for a minute. In no time at all Papa Panov was fast asleep.

And as he slept he dreamed. He dreamed that someone was in his room and he knew at once, as one does in dreams, who the person was. It was Jesus.

"You have been wishing that you could see me, Papa Panov." he said kindly, "then look for me tomorrow. It will be Christmas Day and I will visit you. But look carefully, for I shall not tell you who I am."

When at last Papa Panov awoke, the bells were ringing out and a thin light was filtering through the shutters. "Bless my soul!" said Papa Panov. "It's Christmas Day!"

He stood up and stretched himself for he was rather stiff. Then his face filled with happiness as he remembered his dream. This would be a very special Christmas after all, for Jesus was coming to visit him. How would he look? Would he be a little baby, as at that first Christmas? Would he be a grown man, a carpenter- or the great King that he is, God's Son? He must watch carefully the whole day through so that he recognized him however he came.

Papa Panov put on a special pot of coffee for his Christmas breakfast, took down the shutters and looked out of the window. The street was deserted, no one was stirring yet. No one except the road sweeper. He looked as miserable and dirty as ever, and well he might! Whoever wanted to work on Christmas Day - and in the raw cold and bitter freezing mist of such a morning?

Papa Panov opened the shop door, letting in a thin stream of cold air. "Come in!" he shouted across the street cheerily. "Come in and have some hot coffee to keep out the cold!"

The sweeper looked up, scarcely able to believe his ears. He was only too glad to put down his broom and come into the warm room. His old clothes steamed gently in the heat of the stove and he clasped both red hands round the comforting warm mug as he drank.

Papa Panov watched him with satisfaction, but every now and then his eyes strayed to the window. It would never do to miss his special visitor.

"Expecting someone?" the sweeper asked at last. So Papa Panov told him about his dream.

"Well, I hope he comes," the sweeper said. "You've given me a bit of Christmas cheer I never expected to have. I'd say you deserve to have your dream come true." And he actually smiled.

When he had gone, Papa Panov put on cabbage soup for his dinner, and then went to the door again, scanning the street. He saw no one. But he was mistaken. Someone was coming.

The girl walked so slowly and quietly, hugging the walls of shops and houses, that it was a while before he noticed her. She looked very tired and she was carrying something. As she drew nearer he could see that it was a baby, wrapped in a thin shawl. There was such sadness in her face, and in the pinched little face of the baby, that Papa Panov's heart went out to them.

"Won't you come in," he called, stepping outside to meet them. "You both need a warm by the fire and a rest."

The young mother let him shepherd her indoors and to the comfort of the armchair. She gave a big sigh of relief.

"I'll warm some milk for the baby," Papa Panov said, "I've had children of my own - I can feed her for you." He took the milk from the stove and carefully fed the baby from a spoon, warming her tiny feet by the stove at the same time.

"She needs shoes," the cobbler said.

But the girl replied, "I can't afford shoes, I've got no husband to bring home money. I'm on my way to the next village to get work."

Sudden thought flashed through Papa Panov's mind. He remembered the little shoes he had looked at last night. But he had been keeping those for Jesus. He looked again at the cold little feet and made up his mind.

"Try these on her," he said, handing the baby and the shoes to the mother. The beautiful little shoes were a perfect fit. The girl smiled happily and the baby gurgled with pleasure.

"You have been so kind to us," the girl said, when she got up with her baby to go. "May all your Christmas wishes come true!"

But Papa Panov was beginning to wonder if his very special Christmas wish would come true. Perhaps he had missed his visitor? He looked anxiously up and down the street. There were plenty of people about but they were all faces that he recognized. There were neighbours going to call on their families. They nodded and smiled and wished him Happy Christmas! And beggars - and Papa Panov hurried indoors to fetch them hot soup and a generous hunk of bread, hurrying out again in case he missed the Important Stranger.

All too soon the winter dusk fell. When Papa Panov next went to the door and strained his eyes, he could no longer make out the passers-by. Most were home and indoors by now anyway. He walked slowly back into his room at last, put up the shutters, and sat down wearily in his armchair.

So it had been just a dream after all. Jesus had not come.

Then all at once he knew that he was no longer alone in the room.

This was not dream for he was wide awake. At first he seemed to see before his eyes the long stream of people who had come to him that day. He saw again the old road sweeper, the young mother and her baby and the beggars he had fed. As they passed, each whispered, "Didn't you see me, Papa Panov?"

"Who are you?" he called out, bewildered.

Then another voice answered him. It was the voice from his dream- the voice of Jesus.

"I was hungry and you fed me," he said. "I was naked and you clothed me. I was cold and you warmed me. I came to you today in everyone of those you helped and welcomed."

Then all was quiet and still. Only the sound of the big clock ticking. A great peace and happiness seemed to fill the room, overflowing Papa Panov's heart until he wanted to burst out singing and laughing and dancing with joy.

"So he did come after all!" was all that he said.

HYMN StF 216 See him lying on a bed of straw <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUSEGmUywXw>

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| 1 See him lying on a bed of straw ;
draughty stable with an open door,
Mary cradling the babe she bore ;
the Prince of Glory is his name :
<i>O now carry me to Bethlehem
to see the Lord of love again ;
just as poor as was the stable then,
the Prince of Glory when he came.</i> | 3 Angels, sing again the song you sang,
sing the story of God's gracious plan ;
sing that Bethl'em's little baby can
be the Saviour of us all : |
| 2 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 : | 4 Mine are riches from your poverty,
from your innocence, eternity ;
mine, forgiveness by your death for me ;
child of sorrow for my joy : |
- Michael Perry (1942-1996)

Prayers for Others

Today, O God,
the soles of your feet
have touched the earth.
Today,
the back street, the forgotten place
have been lit up with significance.
Today,
the households of earth
welcome the King of heaven.
For you have come among us,
you are one of us.
So may our songs rise to surround your throne
as our knees bend to salute your cradle.

It is Christmas in Yemen, where rockets and raids define the normal day;
It is Christmas in Syria, where citizens are trying to destroy each other;
It is Christmas in Somalia, where there is no more money for food than on any other day
It is Christmas in families which have sustained terrible loss, through Coronavirus, and many
other causes.

Let the love that shaped earth and heaven dwell within us this Christmas.
Let the love that created humanity dwell within us this Christmas.
Let the love that overcomes suffering and hatred dwell within us this Christmas.
Let the love that causes us to rejoice with loved ones
Dwell within us this Christmas.
Let the love that forgives and renews dwell within us this Christmas.
Let the love that brings reconciliation after separation
Dwell within us this Christmas.
Let the love that brings the blessing of peace dwell within us this Christmas.
May we share that peace with all people near and far.

Amen

HYMN StF 202 Hark the herald angels sing <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COZgBeAvuA8>

- 1 Hark ! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born 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.*
- 2 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 men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel :
- 3 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 :

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Blessing

May the joy of the angels,
the humility of the shepherds,
and the peace of the Christ-Child
be God's gift to you and to all people
this Christmas, and always.
And the blessing of God almighty, father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon us all. *Amen*