

Call to Worship

On this new day, in this new year, we gather.
On this new day, in this new year, we pause.
On this new day in this new year, God is.
God was.
God will always be.
Light shines in the darkness: the new day begins.
And we, God's people,
praise God's new day.

Once Upon A Jesus

- How does the story of Jesus begin?
- Does it begin, "Once upon a Jesus"?

In the Bible there are four stories of Jesus. They were told by different people. The storytellers all chose different ways to begin.

Two of them begin their story with Jesus as a baby, born in Bethlehem. Those are the stories we hear every Christmas.

Another story of Jesus begins when Jesus was grown up, being baptised in a river by his cousin John.

The fourth story begins much, much longer ago—before the universe even existed, before there were any planets or stars or animals, before Jesus ever became a person like us.

When nothing existed except God, Jesus was there! That's where the fourth story begins.

There have been lots of other stories of Jesus, but the four in the Bible are the best. They are different but they are all good and they all help us to know Jesus.

One beginning when he was grown up, two beginning when he was a baby, and one beginning way, way back before the beginning of everything! When there was nothing except God, Jesus was there!

My hope, at the start of this new year, is that you will know the hope and the light and safety of God's love and choose to look for these even on the darkest of days and nights, whether you are hurting and need someone to talk to, whether you are at home and feel alone, whether you are out in the dark, and trying to resist temptations of those things which you know cause trouble, and whether you are floating on a feeling or fighting with the tide, you will find a light that will lead you safely home this Christmas time.

Two thoughts from the kids favourite books to share about light and darkness...

In [Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban](#), after years of being imprisoned, and having had all the happiness sucked out of him by the Dementors, Sirius Black shares this profound observation, [3. "We've all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are."](#) This is a great way to think about who or what or how we feed the light or darkness through our actions, not just at Christmas but all year round. 2020 was a really tough year for many of us, for all sorts of reasons, be it the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or the struggles of isolation, or separations within or from our families, the list could go on. But it has also

been a year where the light has shone through, and I don't just mean on the High Street or in our gardens for Christmas, though that has certainly lifted our spirits. I mean through the many folk who have gone above and beyond to help out, the volunteers who have made meals, done shopping, picked up prescriptions, the healthcare workers who've put themselves at risk day in and day out, the teachers and pupils who've all adapted to online learning, and those who had never heard of zoom or FaceTime, who found it to be a lifeline to help them keep in touch with family.

These are the messengers of our time, who bring light and life and healing as they choose to act in a way that is helpful and brings hope to all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it. For as Dumbledore says in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban,

"Happiness can be found in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."

Dumbledore

If you find yourself in a dark place, may others be keepers of that light for you, and bring you safely through. And if you're feeling hopeful and helpful, may you go and share the light this Christmas.

May you all have a safe and happy Christmas and a healthy and hopefully better new year as we all journey towards the light and look to the Stars with those who journeyed long and far in search of the Christ child.

Whatever may come, I think you're all stars for making it through this really tough year, and I hope you will know the light and life and love of Christmas and share that in practical ways with those closest to you this Christmas. Keep safe, and make space for the light to shine even in these darkest of times.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Creating and enlivening God,

we bless you for every spark of life that fizzles above us and below us,

around us and within: for every moving thing:

the wind in the trees, the waves on the shore,

the planets in the heavens;

for every growing thing: grass and flowers and trees,

bulbs that lie dormant until the time is right

to burst out in a blaze of colour in spring.

We celebrate the existence of every creature that breathes with the breath of your life: creeping,

flying, leaping, diving, soaring things...and human beings,

who imagine ourselves to be the pinnacle of creation,

but are unwilling to accept the responsibility that brings.

Forgive us, merciful God, for walking around your world

with our eyes closed to the beauty and wonder of creation,

its fragility and hurt, and your presence in both.

Remind us of those rare, precious moments when we have seen your glory,

and open our eyes to see it again.

You exult with those for whom life is full and free;

you grieve with those for whom it is constrained and joyless. You draw close,

and invite us to join you there,

our challenge to be bearers of the light, and companions in the darkness;

to allow your spirit so to fill and transform our lives

that those who see us will have seen something of your glory,
and been touched by your grace.

Prayers for those affected by Covid and Brexit.

At this new year's beginning, when many—
ourselves included— are looking to the future with more anxiety than hope,
may we go forward confidently with you, our hands held firmly and safely in yours, and our lives
enfolding in your care. As we pray together the words Christ taught us saying,

Lord's Prayer

Jeremiah 31:7-14

⁷This is what the Lord says: "Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.

Make your praises heard, and say,
'Lord, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.'

⁸See, I will bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.

Among them will be the blind and the lame,
expectant mothers and women in labor;
a great throng will return.

⁹They will come with weeping;
they will pray as I bring them back.

I will lead them beside streams of water
on a level path where they will not stumble,
because I am Israel's father,
and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

¹⁰"Hear the word of the Lord, you nations;
proclaim it in distant coastlands:

'He who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.'

¹¹For the Lord will deliver Jacob
and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

¹²They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—

the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.

They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more.

¹³Then young women will dance and be glad,
young men and old as well.

I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

¹⁴I will satisfy the priests with abundance,
and my people will be filled with my bounty," declares the Lord.

John 1:(1-9),10-18

The Word Became Flesh

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^[a] 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.

¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and^[b] is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Prayer

The Word On The Street

THE WORD ON THE STREET IS...'

Church Bells are ringing, Santa is coming on a tractor, There's a piper in the Square...

When we hear this phrase, The word on this street is—

if we are wise we are aware that it might come in one of three different flavours.

Either, what we are about to hear could be absolute truth, or it could be a version of the truth (not necessarily one we buy into completely or accept for ourselves), or it could be nowhere close to the truth—in other words a false rumour or misguided speculation.

When it comes to Christian faith ('the word on the street'), the Gospel of incarnation, the death and resurrection of God, finds itself taken as absolute truth by some, possible truth by others (but of little personal significance), and by others as the great 'untruth'.

Christmas means for some an annual moment of spiritual enlightenment and fulfilment. Others find excitement only in the secular holiday aspect of the season.

"The Word became flesh and lived among us", yet only some have seen his glory and experienced the wow factor! We say 'only some' for that is the reality, but the statement significantly underplays the scale of how many have seen "seen his glory" across time, and caught a glimpse of it in the last couple of weeks, or indeed through the season of Advent.

God, for many, is real and is not merely a religious idea, but is a presence, right where we are. For us as Christians, that sense of God is very much wrapped up in the incarnation and resurrection. The

Word (God) dwelt with us, the Word (Jesus), though put to death, rose to life and his Spirit is everywhere we are.

One can only muse at how frustrating (to use our own human experience of life) it would be for God in Jesus not to be understood and accepted by the very beings that he had so lovingly created and with whom he desired a relationship of mutual love. One can only ponder on our own experiences of pain and loss as we reflect on God in Jesus suffering even as he re-established a connection point between God and the beloved creation. And one can only bring to mind our own exasperation when we imagine how hard it would be for God in Jesus when, despite all that was achieved and made possible by his actions, such sacrifice of love proves inconsequential to so many, and far removed from their own lived experience.

Yet, as we reflect on our own moments of joy and uplift and what was at their source, perhaps we can also imagine how God in Jesus might feel as a part of the precious moments when those whom God has created do see his glory, and especially when that glory is reflected in actions of goodness, kindness and love within this world.

Leaving Christmas behind and moving to New Year, there is much pressure on the people of God, those who see his glory, for we need to work hard to keep fleshing out the Christmas story and make it live today. Holding on to the presence of God, the embodiment of God, in our messiness, is important to us if we are to succeed at being a prophetic voice, a truth-telling force in our world today.

Regardless of how many grasp it, and not losing sight of the fact that much in our world today is anything but glorious, as the people of the Word we must keep striving to get that Word out onto the street, in order that God's love might put right all that is wrong in our societies and world.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

God of beauty, light and truth;
God of life in full abundance,
we give thanks for everything that enhances our lives and makes them worthwhile.

Gratefully, we acknowledge
the thoughtfulness of friends,
and the kindness of strangers;
our massive good fortune to have food,
and warmth and shelter;
a wealth of knowledge and entertainment
at the touch of a keypad.
We are grateful for phone-calls,
Skyping and Zooming,
when the people we love cannot be with us,
and for the great joy of being together when we can.

Loving God, we ask your blessing on all
who work to make life richer and fuller for others in a myriad of different ways:
scientists, artists, musicians; comics and philosophers;
carers (paid and unpaid); listeners likewise;
the unseen people who clean up the places where we live and work, and our planet;
those who campaign for future change;

and those who roll up their sleeves and get stuck in to help.
God, bless their endeavours, and bless them too.

And while it is not our place to judge anyone, far less to curse them,
there are those whose plans
we would gladly ask you to foil:

those who bully, buy and cheat their way to power and then abuse it for their own ends;
those who make war,
and those who make it possible

by profiting from the manufacture and sale of arms; those who steal the birthright of the poor by
holding on to their wealth and imagining that they deserve it;

those who destroy the childhood of children, the innocence of young women and men, the dignity
of older people by exploiting them for money or personal gratification. God, judge them as we dare
not, and cause their endeavours to fail.

God of life, may we stand with you on the side
of all that is life-enhancing;
God of light, may your light shine in us and
through us until the darkness is dispelled; and may all the credit be yours,
all honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

STAR WORDS

Take a blank piece of paper and in the centre of the paper write in your own hand verse 14 of the
first chapter of John's Gospel:

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

Think about times in your life when you, looking back, felt the presence of Jesus closest to you, and
around the verse write down those examples. As the week goes by, add to these as other times
come to mind.

- How did those occasions help you in your life?
- What difference did they make to your relationship with Jesus?
- How might you go about creating more of those moments?

Choose a Star Word for each person. (If you would like me to choose one for you please let me
know)

Sending

The Lord Jesus lives among us, making his dwelling place in our hearts.

May we go from this time of worship with the living Lord as our companion, our friend and servant, our motivator and encourager, that we might, in love and grace, bring the presence of God and the eternal Word into our communities through our own words and deeds.

Blessing