

Parish of Central Exeter

Celebration of Christmas in music, poetry
and art

December 2020

‘..... There was a birth certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt.’

(Journey of the Magi: T S Eliot)



Introduction.

Celebrating Christmas is more fraught than usual this year, so we have produced these sheets for you to use whenever you wish over the festive season. It is not a traditional carol service: the carols used are not the established ones everyone sings year after year, although you will know them apart from those written by Nigel, his (and Imo's!) daughter Kate, and Richard. We also have a piece of music by Bee. There are no Bible readings: we think the nativity story is familiar, but a mixture of poems, some serious, some amusing. There are also some pictures to show how artists over the centuries have reacted to the event.

If you want a traditional carol service, a search engine will quickly give you access to whole services from King's College and others, and the Cathedral's website will have its own services available.

Nevertheless there is a general structure to the celebration with the pattern being signposted as it develops. Not all the carols used have the words displayed on the screen, so all the words to the carols appear on a separate file.

We hope you will find this celebration a time to reflect and rejoice, remembering that God turns up in the least expected places, such as a stable, at a time when most people's minds are thinking about other things. You might even find a glimpse of Him here.

Welcome

‘**Wolcum Yole**’ by Benjamin Britten

Sung here by the New York University Women's Choir – with some very enthusiastic participants!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE4Vfv6T994>

Advent

"Advent Calendar" by Rowan Williams:

He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.

'Jesus Christ the Apple Tree '

sung here by the choir of St Paul's Cathedral Namirembe, Kampala, Uganda

The carol dates to the eighteenth century, but its authorship is uncertain. Trees, roots and branches are frequently occurring metaphors in the Bible. Apple trees were important productive elements in England, and the practice of wassailing – singing to wish good health to the apple trees for the coming year was carried out on Christmas Eve.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10sV4HF4LIY>

Announcements and reactions

From 'Gabriel's Revelation' Author unknown

He'd been sent to appear somewhere north of Judaea
to an unmarried teenage maid
with a tale so alarming he oozed his most charming
"My dear, you must not be afraid!"

He explained her behaviour had put her in favour
with the heavenly powers that be,
and to tell her bridegroom that she'd have to
make womb for a special delivery.

To the angel's surprise she looked straight in his eyes
and said, "Fine, but I don't figure how,
because Joseph and I haven't yet..." he said "My,
we don't need go into that now!".

He covered his fluster with angelic bluster:
"Don't question the method—believe!
He has strategies still to accomplish his will
of which you could never conceive!".



Annunciation by Fra Angelico
1433

Tempura on wood. Museo
Diocesano, Cortona, Italy

The Angel Gabriel from Heaven did come

This is a Basque folk carol, based on a fourteenth century Latin one. It was paraphrased into English in the nineteenth century by Sabine Baring-Gould, vicar at Lewtrenchard, who had spent time as a boy in the Basque country.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9zCzwwb8Cs&feature=emb_title

I am Joseph by UA Fanthorpe

I am Joseph, carpenter,
Of David's kingly line,
I wanted an heir; discovered
My wife's son wasn't mine.

I am an obstinate lover,
Loved Mary for better or worse.
Wouldn't stop loving when I found
Someone Else came first.

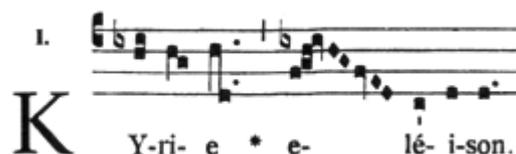
Mine was the likeness I hoped for
When the first-born man-child came.
But nothing of him was me. I couldn't
Even choose his name.

I am Joseph, who wanted
To teach my own boy how to live.
My lesson to my foster son:
Endure. Love. Give.

Of the Father's love begotten.

This is one of the earliest carols, the words written by Aurelius Prudentius in the fourth century, shortly after the Council of Nicea had established the doctrine of the Trinity. The carol makes it very clear from its opening lines that Jesus is both human and divine. The plainsong dates from the thirteenth century.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fpsj25M1Qdl>



Journeys

Song of the Star Richard Skinner (Richard advises that this is best performed as a rap)

Am I a comet? Am I a nova?
A planetary conjunction
That's very quickly over?
Am I a fiction, not scientific fact?
Am I immaterial, utterly abstract?
An archetypal image with a psychic function?
Am I simply eye-strain, an optical illusion?
Or maybe the result of a translator's confusion?

Oh no, no, no; I'm none of them:
I am the star of Bethlehem.

Am I nothing more
Than the arithmetic outcome
Of atoms smashing in my core?
Am I a furnace giving elements their birth?
Or a pretty flower, growing quietly on earth?
Am I on the telly, rich and rather dumb?
Am I just an asterisk, denoting an omission,
Or a footnote afterthought, a textual addition?

Oh no, no, no; I'm none of them:
I am the star of Bethlehem.

I am a star, shining in my prime;
I am the herald
Of the first Christmas-time;
I am a guide blazing in the sky;
I am the compass point to take your bearings by;
I am reassurance when you are imperilled;
I am a finger, pointing to a stable,
Signalling the downfall of the Tower of Babel.

Ah yes, yes, yes; I'm all of them:
I am the star of Bethlehem.

Music interlude

The Three Kings Tango – written and played by Bee. The 'We Three Kings' tune is disguised – see if you can spot it!

<https://www.parishofcentralexeter.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Advent-2.mp3>



The journey of the magi (cont.)

Coming as they did from the first century
they had a few problems with London traffic
and were seriously misled by signs
to the Angel and King's Cross.

Inquiring diligently about the star
they were referred to Professor Brian Cox,
who thought it was *amazing*
while smiling in a constant and strangely unsettling way.

In Harrods the camels
made a mess over Soft Furnishings.

On the Underground
commuters glared at *No Smoking* signs
as incense wafted gently through the carriages,

and when the great day came
they saw the entire voting population
slumped on sofas by four o'clock,
rendered senseless by too much
dead poultry and the Queen,

while over Liberty's and Hamley's
the flickering angels sang
Glory to God in the High St

and they found him,
with the inns full up once more,
in the old familiar place,
bringing their unregarded gifts
to the empty stable
of the human heart
where the infant Christ is born
again and again.





The adoration of the Magi 1600

Oil on panel. Pieter Breughel the younger. Museo Correr, Venice

'Song of the Wise Men' by Nigel and Richard, sung by the children of Ide Primary School, Exeter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbs3SwpsymQ&feature=youtu.be>

Christmas Eve

Help Wanted by Timothy Tocher

Santa needs new reindeer.
The first bunch has grown old.
Dasher has arthritis;
Comet hates the cold.
Prancer's sick of staring
at Dancer's big behind.
Cupid married Blitzen
and Donner lost his mind.
Dancer's mad at Vixen
for stepping on his toes.
Vixen's being thrown out—
she laughed at Rudolph's nose.
If you are a reindeer
we hope you will apply.
There is just one tricky part:
You must know how to fly.



On Christmas night the angels sing (the Sussex carol),

sung here at a church in Poucharramet, a small village in Midi-Pyrenees, (near Toulouse) France.

The carol was first published by an Irish bishop in the sixteenth century. The music normally used now is by Vaughan-Williams

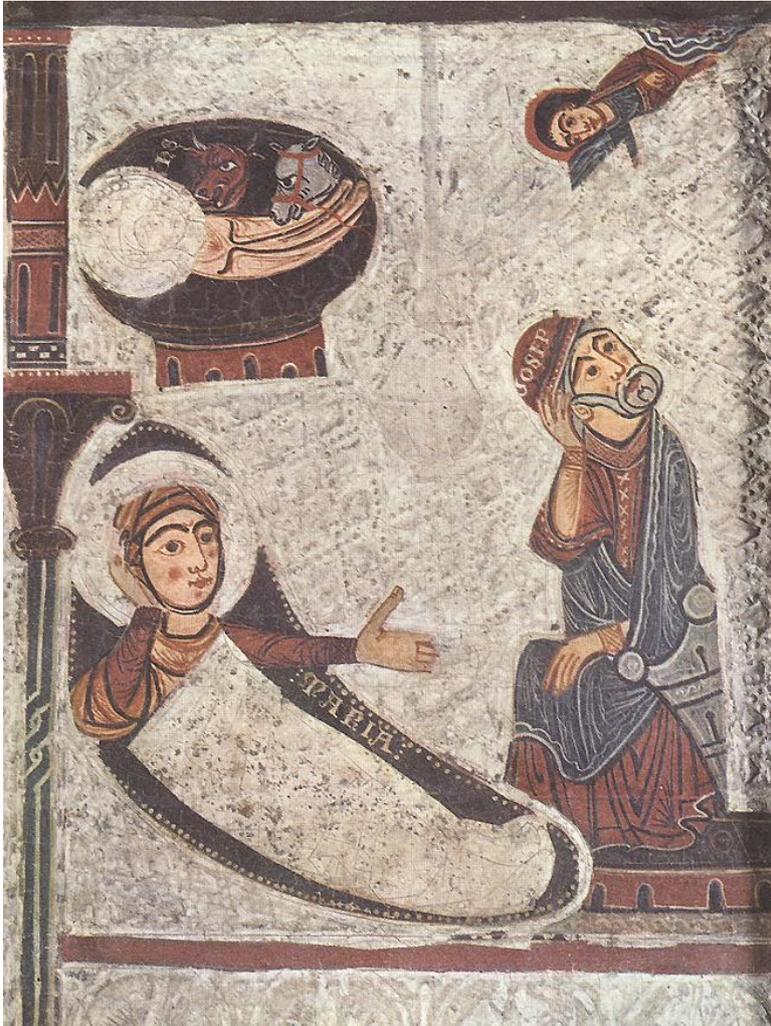
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n597pcZz7Ds>

Minstrels by William Wordsworth

The minstrels played their Christmas tune
To-night beneath my cottage eaves;
While smitten by a lofty moon,
The encircling laurels thick with leaves,
Gave back a rich and dazzling sheen,
That overpowered their natural green.
Through hill and valley every breeze
Had sunk to rest with folded wings:
Keen was the air, but could not freeze
Nor check the music of the strings;
So stout and hardy were the band

That scraped the chords with strenuous hand.
And who but listened?—till was paid
Respect to every inmate's claim,
The greeting given, the music played
In honour of each household name,
Duly pronounced with lusty call,
And a merry Christmas wished to all.

Christmas Day: Birth



Nativity. Early thirteenth century, by unknown master. From an altar frontal in Catalonia, Spain. Wood. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona

In Stable Straw by Kate Gowen (Imogen and Nigel's daughter). Sung by the choir of St David's church, Exeter.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZPtNwttmBc>

Dancing

The universe from which Love sprang
started with a Tiny Bang
when Love, to everyone's surprise,
came dancing out of paradise,
dancing into night and day,
dancing into DNA,
dancing to a different drum,
dancing into kingdom come,
dancing with a virgin stranger,
dancing in the dirty manger,
dancing ever undefiled,
dancing as a little child.

Christmas Day: Presents

January 6th by Richard Skinner

No magi this time,
twelve days late,
lumbering in on camels
with yellow teeth and bad breath,
come to offer strange gifts
to a helpless infant,
along with subtle stellar arts
developed over centuries.

No gold
weighing down the panniers
and wearing holes
in tatty leather pouches;
royal metal fashioned
into bangles, rings, chalices,
and miniature suns
igniting human greed.

No frankincense,
allegedly top quality
(but hard to stop the dealers
cutting it with rubbish);
the ideal smoke
with which to pray to God,
when seeking to persuade,
placate or bribe Him.

No myrrh
in stoppered bottles
made sticky with dribbles;
bitter perfumed gum
to anoint the holy,
sweeten death
and help the local tarts
enhance their allure.

No, only us,
lounging at the barn door,
discussing politics,
the rising crime rate,
current wars, pollution;
wondering if it's right
to bring another child
into the world.

God rest ye merry gentlemen

This is a traditional English carol dating to the eighteenth century or earlier. Sung here by the Bach Choir.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlfHyb397VY>

Christmas Day: Lunch

Talking Turkeys by Benjamin Zephaniah

Be nice to yu turkeys dis christmas
Cos' turkeys just wanna hav fun
Turkeys are cool, turkeys are wicked
An every turkey has a Mum.
Be nice to yu turkeys dis christmas,
Don't eat it, keep it alive,
It could be yu mate, an not on yu
plate
Say, Yo! Turkey I'm on your side.

I got lots of friends who are turkeys
An all of dem fear christmas time,
Dey wanna enjoy it, dey say humans
destroyed it
An humans are out of dere mind,



Yeah, I got lots of friends who are turkeys
Dey all hav a right to a life,
Not to be caged up an genetically made up
By any farmer an his wife.

Turkeys just wanna play reggae
Turkeys just wanna hip-hop
Can yu imagine a nice young turkey saying,
'I cannot wait for de chop',
Turkeys like getting presents, dey wanna watch
christmas TV,
Turkeys hav brains an turkeys feel pain
In many ways like yu an me.

I once knew a turkey called
Turkey
He said 'Benji explain to me please,
Who put de turkey in christmas
An what happens to christmas trees?',
I said 'I am not too sure turkey
But it's nothing to do wid Christ Mass
Humans get greedy an waste more dan need be
An business men mek loadsa cash'.

Be nice to yu turkey dis christmas
Invite dem indoors fe sum greens
Let dem eat cake an let dem partake
In a plate of organic grown beans,
Be nice to yu turkey dis christmas
An spare dem de cut of de knife,
Join Turkeys United an dey'll be delighted
An yu will mek new friends 'FOR LIFE'.

So in case you're convinced and spare the turkey here's a substitute!

The Boar's Head Carol.

This is an example of a macaronic carol – that is a mixture of languages - here Latin and English. It dates from the fifteenth century and describes the tradition of sacrificing a boar and presenting its head at a Yuletide feast.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u_c9G1mKGg

Where next?

The Cast of Christmas Reassembles for Easter by Steve Turner

Take the wise men to the Emperor's palace.
Wash their hands in water.
Get them to say something about truth.
Does anyone know any good Jewish jokes?
The one about a carpenter
who thought he was a King?
The one about the Saviour
who couldn't save himself?
The shepherds should stand with the chorus.
They have a big production number -
'Barabbas, We Love You Baby'.
Mary? She can move to the front.
We have a special section reserved
for family and close friends.
Tell her that we had to cut the manger up.
We needed the wood for something else.
The star I'm afraid I can't use.
There are no stars in this show.
The sky turns black with sorrow.
The earth shakes with terror.
Hold on to the frankincense.
We'll need that for the garden scene.
Angels? He could do with some angels.
Avenging angels.
Merciful angels.
He could really do with some angels.
Baby Jesus.
Step this way please.
My! How you've grown!



Prayer and Blessing

Christmas Affirmation

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.
And may we share that peace
with all people near and far. **Amen.**

(in Prayers for Christmas, posted on the Christian Aid website.)

Christmas Blessing

Believe:
for light is now in the world

Believe:
for God has become one of us

Believe:
for Love is born in each of us

Believe:
for the manger is full

Go and believe
it is as the prophets said
and the blessing of Christmas
of family
of friends
and of God
be with you today

*(written by Roddy Hamilton, and posted on Mucky
Paws. <http://www.nkchurch.org.uk/index.php/mucky-paws>)*

Closing hymn

Gaudete

Our final carol dates from the sixteenth century. This is a low-key production, but of all the versions available, seems the most in keeping with the stable theme. Sung by Choironthestairs

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cn9oi_UCi3w

Thanks

To everyone who has contributed with material or through suggestions: especially Nigel and Bee for music, Richard and Helen for poems.

Happy Christmas

