

Parish of Central Exeter

4th Sunday in Advent

20th December 2020

Emmanuel: God with us

Welcome everyone.



Our readings this morning have been chosen by members of the congregation and the Intercessions provided by Helen. Many thanks.

The Lighting of the Advent Candles

This period was first called Advent in the fourth century and quickly developed into a month-long season of preparation not just for the birth of Jesus, but also for his second coming. The lighting of candles is another ancient tradition – the advent wreath is nineteenth century from Germany. Each candle symbolises a different aspect of the purpose of this season.

The fourth candle is often called the candle of love. It is also associated with the Virgin Mary.

If you wish to light a candle at home, do so now with these words, and we all join in with you:

Jesus is the Light of the world
A light no darkness can ever put out

We light this candle as a sign
that heaven and earth may pass away,
but the word of God will be present in the world for ever and for ever.

Call to Worship

Dreams and angels,
prophecies,
mystery and magi,
choirs and shepherds,
we make our way
to the star-blessed stable,
to the light shining miraculously
in human misery and darkness.

We are almost there.

(written by Christian Aid Scotland)

Gathering Hymn

'People look East' by Eleanor Farjeon. This was one of Averil's favourite carols and we remember her especially at this time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8GNIRcBdvs>

We say

Lord God,
grant us Your strength
as we journey through this sacred season;
be our companion
as we make our way to the cave,
to that place of birth,
and death and rebirth;
may we encounter Eternity's secret
and in simple silence
hear the angels' sing.

Confession

We confess we are not the people you hope us to be, Advent God.
The very ones you favour, we too often ignore or ridicule.
The ones you knock off their pedestals,
we admire and emulate.
We are so focused on having more and more,
we risk being sent away empty.

Forgive us, Mighty God,
and look with grace upon us.

Even now—yes, even in this very moment,
God comes to us,
bringing hope,
bringing forgiveness,
bringing grace as freely offered gifts to us.

(From Lectionary Liturgies)

The collect for Advent

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;

that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.



Collect for the fourth Sunday in Advent

Eternal God,
as Mary waited for the birth of your Son,
so we wait for his coming in glory;
bring us through the birth pangs of this present age
to see, with her, our great salvation
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Worship song

Because the fourth Sunday in Advent is associated with the Virgin Mary it is appropriate to hear and join in the **Magnificat**.

This has been produced by Christian Aid. The words (on screen) are spoken by women of faith.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvrJsy7xaXY>

Readings and Intercessions

There now follows a series of readings chosen by members of the congregation. They are interspersed with times of quiet and our intercessions which come from Helen. These prayers draw upon the four evangelists' accounts of Jesus's early life and offer you the opportunity to hold before God particular people or situations, if you wish. There is no formal written reflection.

"Advent Calendar" by Rowan Williams: chosen by Imo

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.

Worship song

We now hear 'The Wexford Carol', a traditional carol from (surprise!) Wexford, Ireland.
Sung here by the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain. The carol retells the nativity story.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYJRh5KRdjY>

And did it happen? Chosen by Richard.

And did it happen
that in a stable long ago,
a weary couple,
who no-one wanted to know,
should choose a manger,
in spite of the danger,
to hold and hallow the Lord below?

And did it happen
that in the stillness of the night,
the woman laboured
to let God see the light,
and bathed and dressed him,
breastfed and blessed him,
the Word incarnate whose time was right?

And did it happen
that news of this first reached the poor,
compelled by angels
to tiptoe to the door
and see no trappings
just linen wrappings,
a baby for certain and God for sure?

And did it happen
that all of this was meant to be,
that God from distance
should choose to be set free
and show uniqueness
transformed in weakness
that I might touch him and he touch me?

(Wild Goose Publications)

We pray

In Matthew's account, we hear of Joseph trusting in God and accepting a baby that was not his. We hear of Magi travelling long distances, bearing gifts for the Christ-child. We also hear of Herod's duplicity and the atrocity he commits in his fear-driven determination to remain King – and of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt as refugees.

Creator God, help us all to show the same trust in you and the same willingness to give that these stories about Joseph and the Magi bear witness to. Inspire those who govern to do so justly and with wisdom, with the best interests of this planet and its peoples at heart. Help all those who are suffering under arbitrary power, or living in places of conflict, or who have been displaced by persecution or war. Bring them immediate relief, and confidence in your ultimate provision of justice and mercy. We pray especially for...

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.



'Mary and Joseph Can't Make it to Bethlehem'

by Banksy.

This card illustrates disturbing parallels about life in Palestine in the first and twenty-first centuries.

BC – AD by U.A. Fanthorpe chosen by Imo

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing
Happened. Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect

Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

We pray

Mark gives no information about Jesus' early life but begins his account with Jesus's meeting with John the Baptist and the first disciples.

God with us, we remember the first time we encountered Jesus. May we continue on the way with him in growing faith, and may our example and witness this Christmas help clear the way for others to encounter him, too. We pray especially for...

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.



In the 1960s Salvador Dalí produced a series of Christmas Cards for a Barcelona card company. Very few of these survive.

We now hear 'The Sans Carol'. This is a nineteenth century carol originating from Cornwall. We recognise it more from the opening words: 'The Holly bears a berry'. Sung here by the Choir of Guildford Cathedral. Words are on the screen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94yBTOrki0s>

Poem about the incarnation – no title given. This appeared in Bishops Robert's recent letter to the Diocese, and was chosen by Sheila.

Blue homespun and the bend of my breast
keep warm this small hot naked star
fallen to my arms. (Rest ...
you who have had so far to come.)
Now nearness satisfies
the body of God sweetly. Quiet he lies
whose vigour hurled a universe. He sleeps
whose eyelids have not closed before.
His breath (so slight it seems
no breath at all) once ruffled the dark deeps
to sprout a world. Charmed by doves' voices,
the whisper of straw, he dreams,
hearing no music from his other spheres.
Breath, mouth, ears, eyes
he is curtailed who overflowed all skies,
all years. Older than eternity, now he
is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed
to my poor planet, caught
that I might be free, blind in my womb
to know my darkness ended,
brought to this birth for me to be new-born.

© Luci Shaw

We pray

In Luke's account, we hear of two very different responses to the appearance of the Angel Gabriel – Zechariah's wariness and Mary's willingness. We hear also of the shepherd's eagerness to go and see the Christ-child for themselves, and of Anna and Simeon, open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, ending a long time of waiting with recognition of the arrival of the Messiah.

Inspiring God, may we as individuals, and as a Church together with other churches, be always open to the promptings of your Spirit and eager to serve you and others. We think of all those people enduring long times of waiting, through the distances and losses of a global pandemic, through acute or chronic ill-health, or through bereavement. Be with them and be with those working to relieve their loneliness, treat their illness or comfort them in their grief. We remember, too, those loved ones who have died. We pray especially for...

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

I think it's time to lighten the mood for a few moments. At one of Helen's recent poetry workshops, we were invited to try writing a Christmas limerick. This was my (Keith's) attempt.

There was a young virgin, whose name
Wasn't Mary but Jane.
When the angel appeared
He said, 'My, that's weird,
The Bible just won't be the same.

Nappy Christmas

Awash in a manger
the baby awakes
we didn't buy Pampers
we all make mistakes

A Christmas Poem by Wendy Cope chosen by Helen.

At Christmas little children sing and merry bells jingle,
The cold winter air makes our hands and faces tingle
And happy families go to church and cheerily they mingle
And the whole business is unbelievably dreadful, if you're single.

Carol

The next carol originated in Bavaria, and is presented here as one for children. It isn't really, and adults enjoy singing it just as much. We don't know it in English, and the words on the screen are in German. The title is 'Kommet ihr Hirten' – come you shepherds - and as you will see, invites us as shepherds to come to the stable to acclaim the Redeemer.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olLTII_UTd4

Christmas is really for the children chosen by Richard

Christmas is really
for the children.
Especially for children
who like animals, stables,
stars and babies wrapped
in swaddling clothes.
Then there are wise men,
kings in fine robes,
humble shepherds and a
hint of rich perfume.

Easter is not really
for the children
unless accompanied by
a cream filled egg.
It has whips, blood, nails,
a spear and allegations
of body snatching.
It involves politics, God
and the sins of the world.
It is not good for people
of a nervous disposition.
They would do better to
think on rabbits, chickens
and the first snowdrop
of spring.

Or they'd do better to
wait for a re-run of
Christmas without asking
too many questions about
what Jesus did when he grew up
or whether there's any connection.

Steve Turner

John goes right back to the beginning – to the Word that was with God and that was God, and that became flesh and dwelt among us. He reminds us that the light shone in the darkness and that the darkness could not understand or overcome it.

Eternal God, the disruptions of this year have shattered many secular certainties, harmed many people financially, practically and emotionally, and made them feel that this is a time of darkness. Thank you for the gift of faith, however wavering or strong ours is, that you are always with us, and the darkness will never overcome the light. Be with those who are worried, frightened or despairing this Christmas, and help us be a light for them, too. We pray especially for...

Gracious and merciful God, accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,
help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

*As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to Nigel and St David's Choir singing
'God to Enfold you'*

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





Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it a sacramental moment.

Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Post Communion Collect

Heavenly Father,
who chose the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of the promised saviour:
fill us your servants with your grace,
that in all things we may embrace your holy will
and with her rejoice in your salvation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Commission & Benediction

In a cynical and despairing world, O God,
give us a quietly prophetic voice
to proclaim your hope.

In a violent and angry world, O God,
give us a quietly prophetic voice
to proclaim your peace.

In a dismissive and disinterested world, O God,
give us a quietly prophetic voice
to proclaim your compassion.

And may our quietly prophetic lives,
be channels of your restoring grace
wherever we may go. Amen.

(written by John van de Laar, and posted on Sacredise.com)

Blessing

May the blessing of God fall on our community,
May it be a safe place,
full of understanding and acceptance,
where you can be as you are,
without the need of any mask
or pretense or image. Amen.

(posted on Third Space. <http://third-space.org.uk/>)

Closing Music

'In Dulce Jubilo' played here by Mike Oldfield. A good jaunty version to bring this morning's service to a close.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCvz7uf1MIU>



Scroll down for Coffee Break

Coffee Break

If you were not sure of the allusion in the picture at the top of the service sheet you are either very young or were off-planet in 1976 when the Two Ronnies introduced an unsuspecting world to this sketch. Watch it all on this link!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNTM9iM1eVw>

Well before social media as we understand it today, things that people spoke or wrote could still 'go viral'. This is one such piece dating to 1897, when a young girl wrote a letter to the New York Sun Newspaper. The paper published the letter and their reply.

Dear Editor—

I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, "If you see it in The Sun, it's so." Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?

Virginia O'Hanlon

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the scepticism of a sceptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours, man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies. You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if you did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived could tear apart. Only faith, poetry, love, romance, can

push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives and lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.



The Nativity by Giotto c 1315
Church of St Frances, Assisi.

Scroll down for Night Prayer

Night Prayer

4th Sunday in Advent
20th December 2020

'The Great 'O's -
O Emmanuel

Preparation

Father God,
We rest in you.

Jesus the Son,
We rest in you.

Holy Spirit,
We rest in you.

Silence

Introduction

O Emmanuel

The seven 'O's' of Pope Gregory the Great conclude with the most familiar one, by title at least, namely 'O Emmanuel' — opening the much-loved hymn "O come, O come, Emmanuel". The word means 'God with us', the suffix '-el' (= God) occurring in a number of biblical names such as Bethel ('House of God'), and 'angel' (messenger of God) with three of the archangels named as Micha-el, Gabri-el, Rapha-el.

Pope Gregory is following the opening of Matthew's gospel (1:22-23 — which itself refers back to Isaiah 7:14) in applying the term 'Emmanuel' to Jesus — Jesus as being "God with us". This is an assertion at the core of Christianity, that there is some sort of equivalence between God and Jesus. But how do we interpret or understand this?

Jesus, some would say, actually *is* God, such that Ultimate Reality itself quite literally took on human form, walked and talked in a specific area of the earth a couple of thousand years ago as an itinerant preacher, healer and exorcist, and then, after the events of the first Easter, ceased to be manifest in human form at the event known as the 'Ascension'.

Others, drawing on the deeply metaphorical nature of much religious discourse, would say that referring to Jesus as being "God with us" does not mean that he was literally Ultimate Reality disguised as a human being, but that he actually *was* a human being, a full-blooded man whose DNA derived from two human parents. Why then call him "God-with-us"?



Because, the argument goes, he lived a life so extraordinarily open to the mysterious Ultimate Reality in which we 'live and move and have our being' (and which he referred to as 'the Father'), that we can say, "If you want to know what Ultimate Reality is like; if you want to witness the nature of the Father; if you want to see how God expresses Godself through a human life; then consider Jesus, his life, teachings, and actions — they give the purest insight possible into the nature of God." Jesus: the walking, talking, living, breathing metaphor for God.

In this view, Jesus is rightly known as "God-with-us" because, as the character Melanie Mason says in a recently published novel *, "he remained true to the deep insight he had about the nature of ultimate reality, and how humans could and should behave."

I don't have any privileged access into the mind of Pope Gregory when he wrote his antiphons so can't say what his stance would be (though maybe I can guess). But that's not the point. The point is that his antiphons, and *O Emmanuel* in particular, provide starting points for us to ponder upon, meditate on, God, Jesus and ourselves, whether we believe Jesus to be literally God or (metaphor is unavoidable) the most transparent of windows onto God.

Below, the original *O Emmanuel* antiphon is developed in Malcolm Guite's *sonnet* and recast in Jim Cotter's *Cry of Advent* of the same title. In the absence of any of my *Invocations* referring to Emmanuel, I have chosen to conclude with *O Starfish*, with its verbal union of the night sky and the deep sea suggesting the ultimate union of all things within a single name. Some images are inevitably better (in the sense of being more productive) for some people, other images better for others. So, as on previous weeks, you are invited, as you read them, to allow your own imagination and reflection to engage with the metaphor(s) for God/Christ/ Divinity/ Transcendence/Truth in whatever way works for you. You can't get it wrong...

* *If you are wondering which work is being referred to, you might like to ask Richard, our Parish expert on the modern novel.*

Hymn

O Come O Come Emmanuel

We have had three quite different performances of this hymn, but until now, not one performed by a traditional choir plus organ, and leads to a triumphant ending. This version is by the St Michaels Singers and the Coventry Singers. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKu0orOt8Uw>

Old Testament Reading Isaiah 7: 10-14

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³ Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

The Great 'O's – O Emmanuel

O Emmanuel

our king and our lawgiver,
the hope of the nations and their Saviour:
Come and save us, O Lord our God.

Pope Gregory the Great

We suggest you maintain a period of silent reflection after each piece, and you might like to close each session listening to the original (short) Gregorian Antiphon: O Emmanuel, sung as have been all the previous ones by Cantate Regensburg.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdu0HjiLEn4>

O Emmanuel

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us,
O long-sought with-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name,
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness,
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

Malcolm Guite

O Emmanuel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdu0HjiLEn4>

O Emmanuel
God-with-us,
at one with our humanity,
whose glory is our abundant life,
come and transform us
who find our destiny in you. *Jim Cotter*

O Emmanuel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdu0HjiLEn4>

O Starfish
pentagram of the deep,
singular descendant from the night sky;
beached by the sea's long retreat,
sprawled among junk and bladderwrack;
you are two realms united by one name:
come, return to our troubled depths,
reunite us with the glory of the heavens.

Richard Skinner

Advent Prayer

With expectant waiting
we anticipate your coming.

Come close to us, Lord,
come very close.

Come, Alpha and Omega,
who is from before the ages.

Come, Son of Joseph and Son of Mary,
who went down to Nazareth to be obedient to them.

Come, Morning Star,
who named the stars.

Come, carpenter from Nazareth,
who knows the smell of planed wood.

Come, Beloved Son of God,
who knows the heart of God.

Come, Son of Man,
who knows the hearts of God's people.

Come, Lord of Life and Prince of Peace.
Come, Dayspring and Rising Sun.
Come, Wonderful Counsellor.
Come Emmanuel, God with us;
God very close to us.
Amen. (Ged Johnson/CAFOD)

Blessing

May the blessing of Light be on you
Light without and light within,
May the blessed sunlight shine on you
And warm your heart till it glows like
A great peat fire, so that the stranger
May come and warm himself at it,
And also a friend.
And may the light shine out of the two eyes of you,
Like a candle set in two windows of a house,
Bidding the wanderer to come in out of the storm.

Celtic Blessing posted on Godspacelight.com

Closing music

We are closing with a final version of O Come O Come Emanuel, written and played by Bee. It brings our Advent Sunday worship to a quiet contemplative close.

<https://www.parishofcentralexeter.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/o-come-02.mp3>

Thanks

Thanks to everyone who has participated, choosing poems, Helen for intercessions this morning, and to Richard for the introduction to all the Advent Night Prayers.

Material taken or adapted from other websites has an attribution made where possible.

Happy Christmas!

