

starters for Sunday

Christmas Day

25 December 2015

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Tom Gordon, former Chaplain to Marie Curie Hospice, Edinburgh, for his thoughts on Christmas Day.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

Introductory note

Recent experience and developments within Church life in Scotland would indicate that a church service on Christmas Day, when 25th December does not fall on a Sunday, would incline more to being a ‘family service’ than an act of worship which is traditional in style and content. It is unlikely, therefore, that such a service would contain a formal ‘sermon’ as such, or anything which might be seen as a biblical exposition. This is particularly the case with those Lectionary passages (for this year, the Psalm and Epistle, for example) which are not seen as traditional Christmas readings. However, it is important for the preacher or worship leader to have some knowledge of the context of all the readings. What follows in this section, therefore, is some brief, but nonetheless important, background to all these readings – both the familiar and unfamiliar in the context of Christmas.

[Isaiah 9: 2-7](#)

(New International Version)

² *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*

³ *You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.*

⁴ *For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.*

⁵ *Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.*

⁶ *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.

⁷ *Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.*

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Background to OT lesson

This passage is in direct contrast with what precedes it. For “here is not only the promise of a new day of light, joy and peace and of a kingdom established in justice and righteousness, but [here] is a statement that all this has taken place.” [John Mauchline, ‘Isaiah 1-39’].

Verse 2: The time of darkness is past (see [John 1: 4-9](#)). The people have been living in “a land of gloom” [Mauchline] and not, as the AV translates it, ‘the shadow of death’. The implication is that things are very serious and disaster is close. Therefore, the phrase “have seen a great light” gives the dramatic contrast to what currently prevails, and the promise that a new day is about to burst forth.

Verse 3: It is God who has brought about this change, and not the people or their leaders. The increase in the population – as with the birth of all children – is a source of great joy. The remainder of the verse is open to wide interpretation, but the best translation [Mauchline] is likely to be “You have made them greatly happy; you have given them much cause for gladness”. The image is of joy and gladness that are unrestrained.

Verse 4: This describes the oppressive regime the people had lived with. The people had been carrying a heavy load, like the yoke across the shoulders of an animal. The people, therefore, had undergone a time of hard service. And the reference to Midian? Perhaps this points to a comparison with the deliverance from the Midianites by Gideon ([Judges 6-8](#)).



Verse 5: This clearly tells of the end of war, at least for Judah. Mauchline suggests that “armour” means a shoe or boot. Consequently, it might read, “for every boot of warrior tramping noisily.” Boots and blood-soaked garments represent the things of war. They are to be burned to ashes. Their day is done.

Verse 6: Suddenly, we have the birth of a son to the community. He will be named Immanuel. He will have an ‘office’ prepared for him. His name is not a name as we might know it, but a description of his office. And his name is in four parts – a rule of unfailing wisdom (cf Jesus affirmation “I am the truth”); a rule of God, the mighty hero; the everlasting Father, the promise of eternal welfare and nurture; the peaceful security craved by us all. Note, it is not said that this child will be born to a specific women, but will be born ‘to us’, ie to the community – Immanuel, ‘God with us’. The rule is to be “upon his shoulders”, ie it is his burden to carry and not ours – in sharp contrast to the ‘yoke’ the people were already carrying.

Verse 7: This verse would be better translated [Mauchline] – “Great shall be the dominion, and unending peace shall rest upon the throne of David and his kingdom shall be established and upheld in justice and righteousness...”

Psalm 96

(New International Version)

¹ *Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.*

² *Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.*

³ *Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples.*

⁴ *For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.*

⁵ *For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.*

⁶ *Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.*

⁷ *Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*

⁸ *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.*

⁹ *Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.*

¹⁰ *Say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns.’*

The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.

¹¹ *Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.*



¹² *Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.*

¹³ *Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.*

He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Background to the Psalm

I've nothing really to add to what the Psalm itself offers us. It is a Psalm of praise - unbounded, unrestrained, fulsome, heartfelt praise, which calls on all the heavens and all the earth to join in. What a wonderful sentiment on Christmas morning!

[Titus 2: 11-14](#)

(New International Version)

¹¹ *For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

Background to the Epistle

William Barclay writes [Barclay, 'The letters of Timothy, Titus and Philemon'], "There are few passages in the New Testament which so vividly set out the moral power of the Incarnation as this passage does. Its whole stress is the moral effect of the Incarnation on [all people], the moral miracle of change which Jesus Christ can work."

Titus is considered to be a Church elder, one of those people who has levels of responsibility with the Christian Community and to whom people will look for an example of Christian service. He, therefore, has to exhibit the appropriate character of a Church leader, necessary to secure the teaching of sound doctrine against its contradiction by those who would oppose it. Such character begins within the Christian household, finds its roots in the Gospel, and, as the letter goes on to make clear, is to be shared with the whole community.

The Christmas message, therefore, begins in the heart of the Christian, is shown in the intimacy of family life, strengthens the community of faith, and spreads out into the entire world.



Luke 2: 1-14*(New International Version)*

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 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.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

Background to the Gospel lesson

Some points to note...

1. The Census:
 - a. This would be primarily for taxation purposes.
 - b. Historical documents indicate that such a census would take place every 14 years.
 - c. If the documents which give evidence of the regularity of a census in Syria from 20 AD onwards are to be confirmed, then the likelihood is that this census took place in 8 BC.



- d. Quirinius didn't actually become Governor of Syria until 6 AD, but he held an official post in those regions from 10 BC until 7 BC, and 'it was during that first period that the census must have been taken'. [Barclay, 'Gospel of Luke']
2. The journey to Bethlehem:
 - a. The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 80 miles.
 - b. Travellers brought their own food, and hospitality on the way was offered in terms of fodder for the animals and a fire to cook on.
 - c. The 'stable' was more likely to be a cave than the sense we have of stables nowadays.
 - d. The word which we translate as 'manger' means, generally, a place where animals feed. It was likely to be a stone trough.
 - e. Mary was likely to be about 13 or 14 years old.
 3. The shepherds:
 - a. The shepherds were the outcasts of their day, despised by good, orthodox people.
 - b. They couldn't possibly keep the details of the laws around cleanliness - ie meticulous ceremonial hand-washings and all the rules and regulations that went with them.
 - c. They seldom settled in one place for long, their flocks constantly moving on to find pasture.
 - d. It is possible that these shepherds were in charge of the flocks which were available to the Temple authorities for 'unblemished sacrifices'. [Barclay...]
 4. The angels:
 - a. When a Jewish child was born, local musicians congregated at the house to greet him with simple music.
 - b. With Jesus being born in a stable, no such ceremony could be available. So the angels provided the music which human resources couldn't.



Illustrative material

Note:

A Christmas Day all-age or family services very often lends itself to a time of story-telling, either through a new way of relating the Nativity narrative, or by using a contemporary story which throws up fresh insights and ideas around familiar themes. What follows are two such modern stories. Suggested points to note and expand upon - if they are required - are included at the conclusion of each story.

The Nativity Play

It began without any great fuss. The Nativity Play in the local school had followed the same pattern for generations. It took place in the school hall, and there was an open invitation to parents and visiting dignitaries to come along. Parents and others sat in rows in the back half of the hall. Facing them, making three sides of an open square, sat the well-scrubbed and wide-eyed 5 and 6-year-olds from the Primary 1 and most of the Primary 2 classes. The selected youngsters from the chosen P2 class for that year who were the ‘principals’ in the nativity drama were safely ensconced in the gym changing room.

The Christmas story unfolded along familiar lines. The children sang a Bethlehem-type song, and in from the changing room, encouraged by a fraught P2 teacher, came the beaming Joseph and adorable Mary, bedecked respectively in striped tea-towel tied round the head with dad’s old tie, and a blue veil, which looked suspiciously like the same material as the curtains in the upper-school staff loo. Despite Joseph’s passion for waving at his mum in the back row - and the silly woman waving back - and Mary’s veil slipping dangerously over her eyes, the expectant couple arrived safely at the stable, right in the middle of the open square of carolling children.

The innkeeper got his words right - no funny stories to tell of fluffed lines this year - the baby Jesus was duly delivered and laid in the manger, and the shepherds made their entry complete with crooks and stuffed animals under their arms. (Well, there was one animal that did look like a lamb, but what was that lad at the back doing carrying a monkey with red and white striped trousers? O well, the value of modern exegetical interpretation of scripture...) The tableau was almost complete, Mary and Joseph centre stage, shepherds watching their menagerie on Bethlehem’s plains by night, and the angelic P1 and P2s singing beautifully.



All was ready for the entry of the three kings. The pianist belted out the appropriate chord. The choristers struck up with an impressive kingly song. The changing-room door opened, and in walked – two kings. ‘We three kings from Orient are...’ with one who seemed to have got lost along the way. The two kings, however, appeared to have no knowledge of their wayward companion. They were heading for Bethlehem, right reason or none. There was no way these kings were going to miss the action. Their journey was well planned, round the back of the P2s, into the middle of the drama, and straight into Bethlehem’s manger-square. They walked with style, well-rehearsed, slowly, in time to the music, ready to present their gifts when the singing ended.

The two Kings were doing fine and all was going well, until the dressing room-door burst open and, falling through it, came the third king – cloak flapping, present for the baby Jesus tucked jauntily under his arm, cardboard crown at a crooked angle, and LATE! (Why, no one ever figured out, though a P2 teacher was seen in tears later on! Artistic temperament, perhaps?)

Well, this third king may have been guilty of tardiness, or an inability to follow instructions, or of falling out with his teacher, but he was not short of intelligence. Any fool could see that there was no way he could get to Bethlehem by the time the music was finished and meet up with his two companions ready for the next dramatic scene. So he decided he would take a short cut – right through three rows of P1 choristers. Now that might have been OK if the P1s knew he was coming, or if a teacher had got there soon enough to make a suitable gap, or if the recalcitrant king hadn’t decided to run at full tilt. But the kids weren’t ready for this intrusion, and the teacher wasn’t alive enough to the dangers, and the king didn’t fancy walking.

So he ran, tripped over a stray P1 leg, fell, skidded along a slippery floor, and arrived at the manger in time to join his more sedate regal companions. But, having arrived, he couldn’t stop arriving. He continued to slide, right into the stable, right up to the manger, right into the lap of the suitably surprised Mary. The manger went one way, the precious gift of Frankincense went another. A cardboard crown appeared in Joseph’s lap, and the baby Jesus, free now of the restrictions of his swaddling bands, rolled gently towards the front row of the somewhat startled Primary 2s.



Teachers ran to the rescue. A clever pianist continued with some incidental music until a semblance of order was restored. The final carol was sung. The star performers took their bow – to the most thunderous applause anyone could ever recall at a school Christmas Nativity Play. And one tear-stained parent was heard to remark that the school children that year had given her one of the best Christmas presents she'd ever had!

From "A blessing to follow" by Tom Gordon, Wild Goose Publications, 2009

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Notes for explanation if necessary:

1. So much of Christmas can be well prepared, but sometimes new meaning bursts in when we least expect it.
2. Christmas is full of things that are familiar, traditional and routine. God has a habit of offering us something different and new. Is the Incarnation not the supreme example of that?
3. It's not just the 'together' and 'tidy' people who come to Bethlehem, but the rushed, and unprepared, and scruffy, and unconventional ... We all have a place at the stable. Jesus comes for us all.
4. In the midst of the formality of worship, faith, service, and the like, isn't it good that we can find spontaneous and unexpected joy?

The Christmas project

Zac's dad had a shed. It sat at the bottom of the long back garden, partly out of sight behind the old apple tree. Zac had helped his dad build the shed during the school holidays in the summer. He'd been the one who did most of the painting too – at least as high as he could reach, for his dad had said it was too dangerous for a little boy to do painting from a ladder. So Zac's dad had painted the really high bits and put the felt on the roof – because it was Zac's dad's shed.

It wasn't that Zac hadn't been allowed into the shed – at least he had been at the start. He'd helped his dad put in a workbench and hooks on the walls for his dad's tools. He'd watched as his dad fitted a 'jig-saw' – whatever that was – though it didn't look anything like any jigsaw Zac



had ever played with. He'd not been allowed to help with the big metal vice his dad fixed to the workbench – 'too heavy and too dangerous', his dad had said – but he'd been amazed to see how tightly it gripped a piece of metal in its jaws when his dad had turned the handle really hard.

Zac had been chuffed when his dad had given him his whole box of tools and asked him to hang them on the hooks and holders on the wall beside the bench. Zac had great fun putting all the screwdrivers in a row, the little red one, the shabby blue one, the longer yellow one, and so on, till they were all in place – 'like soldiers on parade', his dad had said. And then there were the spanners, and pliers, and hammers, and funny tools with sharp ends which Zac didn't know the name of. And when he was done with arranging the tools, his dad was very pleased indeed.

But Zac hadn't really been in the shed much since then. It was his dad's shed, after all, and not for Zac to play in. It was locked when his dad wasn't there.

Zac's dad was in the shed a lot these days. As the summer moved into autumn, and autumn was taken over by the colder winter days, Zac's dad was in the shed more and more. When Zac was going to bed he could look out over the garden and just about see his dad moving around in the shed through the little window that faced the house, the lighted window now able to be seen through the barer branches of the apple tree.

Zac had asked his dad what he was doing in the shed, and could he come and watch. 'Soon enough. You'll see soon enough,' was the gentle but dismissive response. He'd asked his mum if she knew what dad was up to in the shed. She replied that he should ask his dad. So he did – again – and was told, 'Soon enough, soon enough ...' He'd asked his dad if he could help, just as he'd done with the painting and the tools. 'Not just now,' he was told. So Zac's dad spent a lot of time in the shed. And Zac wondered...

Four weeks before Christmas, the wondering was over. Zac had come home from school, and, after his homework, he'd had supper with his mum and dad as usual. But before bed-time, instead of his usual milk and biscuits, Zac was in for a surprise when his dad sat him on his knee and announced, 'Would you like to come to see what's been happening in the shed?' 'Yes please!' said Zac excitedly. 'Can we go now?'



So with great ceremony and with Zac's mum and dad grinning from ear to ear and Zac about to explode with excitement, a procession to the bottom of the garden took place. The investigative party stopped at the door. 'Wait there,' dad instructed, and, having unlocked the padlock, he slipped inside the shed and closed the door behind him. And after a few minutes that seemed like an eternity, the door opened slowly, and there, in a brightly lit shed, Zac was greeted with an incredible sight. For filling the whole of one end of the shed was the most amazing Nativity scene he'd ever set eyes on. There was a stable with a light shining on it from above. There was a Mary and a Joseph and a baby Jesus in a manger, and shepherds and sheep and kings and all the rest... It was all there, and more besides, just as Zac had learned about the Christmas story. And it was just beautiful...

But as the wide-eyed Zac moved closer to take in the details, he began to notice things he thought he'd seen before. He tried to work it out. Could the walls of the stable be the insides of the kitchen cabinets that he was sure had gone to the tip when the kitchen had been revamped back in the autumn? And that light that shone on the stable looked remarkably like the broken lamp that used to be in his bedroom. And was that manger really a margarine tub? And could the sheep have been made from his mum's fleecy slippers that she'd thrown out weeks ago?

Zac was amazed. There was so much to take in and it would take him several visits over the next few weeks, as well as detailed explanations from his dad, to believe that kings could start off as sauce-bottles, transformed with cloaks made from discarded curtains; a Joseph could have his beginnings in parts rescued from an old vacuum cleaner; and shepherds' crooks could be fashioned from garden stakes.

It was the best Christmas scene Zac could ever have imagined, and he took great delight in showing it all to his friends as Christmas approached – and auntie Gladys when she visited, and Mrs Tomlinson from next door, and the postman, and anyone else who came to the house – and excitedly explaining how the amazing Christmas scene had been put together. His dad was so clever in making all of this from things that had been thrown away.

And in a well-practised speech, Zac always added what his dad had told him when the Nativity display had first been unveiled: 'Things that are wasted can still be well used. There's a lot can be



done with stuff other people just throw away. What's broken and useless can be made new again at Christmas.'

From "Welcoming each wonder" by Tom Gordon, Wild Goose Publications, 2010

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Notes for explanation if necessary:

1. God comes in Jesus to gather us all up in His love. The broken, the rejected, the misfits, the discarded, the weak, the abused, and so on, and makes something beautiful in which we all have a place.
2. A pregnant women, a lowly stable, unclean shepherds, wise-men who were strangers, a bemused Joseph, a humble donkey – and much more – are gathered together to give us the wonder of what we celebrate at Christmas.
3. The Incarnation means that no one is left out of God's love.

Broken

A broken world,
Picked up,
Examined,
Ready to be thrown away;
But taken,
And reformed,
And made whole again.

A broken hope,
Dismissed,
Cried over,
Ready to be cursed;
But taken,
And re-clothed,
And offered a new beginning.



A broken soul,
Blackened,
Ruined,
Ready to be rejected;
But taken
And loved,
And nurtured into a new possibility.

A broken love,
Useless,
Failed,
Ready to be discarded;
But taken,
And restored,
And beautifully transformed.

From "Welcoming each wonder" by Tom Gordon, Wild Goose Publications, 2010

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Presents

Auntie Flo brought socks again this Christmas...
well, it's a tradition,
for that's been my present from Auntie Flo
every single year
for as long as I can remember...
hairy ones she'd knitted
from her usual
odd balls of wool
and folded in tissue-paper
and hidden under the cushions of the sofa
for months and months,



well pressed by every bottom that had rested there,
and now mine,
ready to join the dozens of other pairs -
as yet unworn –
and all the right size, though...
How did she know that?

I gave Auntie Flo Freesia Talc again this Christmas...
well, it's a tradition,
for that's been my present to Auntie Flo
every single year
for as long as I can remember...
old woman's smelly talc,
bought at the Church
Christmas Fair
and wrapped in gaudy, glossy paper,
(kept in the kitchen cupboard
for months and months,
since we'd bought it half-price last January)...
and now hers,
ready to join the dozens of other tins of talc,
(I'll bet, unused...)
and all the right fragrance, though...
How did I know that?

I got a kiss from Auntie Flo this Christmas, and I kissed her back...
well, it's a tradition,
for we've kissed each other
every single year
for as long as I can remember...
and hugged too,



and smiled a lot,
and giggled,
dressed in silly party hats...
and we've remembered it for months and months,
long after Christmas is over
for another year,
when January has come and gone...
and now ours,
ready to join the dozens of other hugs and kisses -
well worn -
and all the right kind of loving, though...
How did we know that?

From "A blessing to follow" by Tom Gordon, Wild Goose Publications, 2009

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The search

There was once a man who went on a search
for the meaning of life.
He travelled far and wide, covered many miles,
and looked in many places.

He gained wealth, status and fame.
'I will find meaning here,' he said.
But wealth gave no purpose,
and status no peace,
and fame was an illusion of worth.

He found ritual and tradition.
'I will find meaning here,' he said.
But ritual became empty,
and tradition became a dull set of routines,



devoid of substance.

He met saints and heroes.

‘They will give me meaning,’ he said.

But though he copied their ways
and sought to emulate their living,
he felt no fulfilment of his own.

He saw sights and wonders.

‘They will give me meaning,’ he said.

But though he marvelled at mystery
and delighted in beauty,
he was not changed.

So he abandoned his travels

and gave up his search for meaning.

He came home to what was familiar,
where he knew what to expect.

He lived simply,

for he needed no wealth.

He reflected deeply,

for he had no ritual to use.

He communed with his own soul,

for he had no other companion.

He found mystery in the silence,

and guidance in his dreams.

There was once a man who went on a search

for the meaning of life,

but discovered it only when he came home



and found himself.

From “Welcoming each wonder” by Tom Gordon, Wild Goose Publications, 2010

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Reminders

I remember the story I heard long ago
 In innocent childhood, believing it; so
 Amazingly different; as clear as a bell –
 O yes, I remember it well.

I remember the story shared often since then,
 Through frequent reminders, again and again;
 Those great Bible stories; their meaning so clear –
 O yes, I remember each year.

I remember the story - traditional words;
 Familiar old carols; I never was bored
 With shepherds, and angels who came from above –
 O yes, I remember with love.

I remember the story – the manger; the babe;
 Three wise-men who travelled; the gifts that they gave;
 The wonder enshrined in the Bethlehem boy –
 O yes, I remember with joy.

I remember the story – but what does it mean
 To me now I’m hearing it over again?
 Will it have an impact; a message, or not?
 O yes, I remember – so what?

I remember the story – so now I must search
 To know it’s as fresh as I found it at first;



To feel the excitement, the mystery too.

O yes, I remember – it's new!

I remember the story ... So this is the deal –

Engage with its newness, and know that it's real;

Be changed by the wonder; be moved in the 'now'.

O yes, I remember – and how!

I remember the story – but not from the past;

It's modern; still topical; with us to last.

So come now – discover a meaning that's new.

O yes, I remember... Will you?

From "With an open eye" by Tom Gordon, Wild Goose Publications, 2011

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More than the X-factor

'We hear the beating of wings over Bethlehem and a light that is not of the sun or of the stars shines in the midnight sky. Let the beauty of the story take away all narrowness, all thought of formal creeds. Let it be remembered as a story that has happened again and again, to men of many different races, that has been expressed through many religions, that has been called by many different names. Time and space and language lay no limitations upon human brotherhood.'

The New York Times, 25 December 1937

Christians complain about the commercialisation of Christmas. The meaning is lost, they say, as the religious content of Christmas is squeezed out or reduced to a minimum. The symbol of this, they continue, is the widespread use of 'Xmas'. Jesus appears to have become an X, the 'unknown quantity' at Christmas time. 'Put Christ back into Christmas,' is the cry.

There is, however, another way of looking at this. If the cross is at the heart of the Christian faith and, therefore, the predominant Christian symbol, then 'Christ' can, and often is, depicted by a '+'. So 'Christmas' could be written not as xmas but as '+mas'? If that's true, then the heart of Christmas is no longer the unknown factor, but the extra factor, the 'plus' factor.



December 25th was fixed as the date when Christians could celebrate the birth of Jesus because it could be conveniently merged with a pagan festive celebration. So it's fair to say that the celebration came first, and the rejoicing at the birth of Jesus was the completion of it all. The 'plus' meant it could make sense. Maybe we'll still be left with people complaining that Christ is left out of Christmas. But I'm happier sticking with those who see Jesus as the 'plus' and not the 'x' factor in it all.

If there's an 'x' at all, let it mark an important spot.

From "Look well to this day" by Tom Gordon, Wild Goose Publications, 2014

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Morning Grace

The angels have folded
their sheet music
and stored it away
for another year,
twittering away
about the ski-trip
planned for New Year.

The shepherds are all
snug in their beds,
thoughts of last night
distracting them from
much-needed sleep,
while kids play
quietly in the next room
(with an occasional, very loud
'SHUSH! You'll wake them!')

Mary turns to Joseph
in the midst of packing



for the trip,
grumbling,
'Wise ones, huh?
Not smart enough
to bring something practical
like a crib or nappies?'

Jesus lies quietly
in the manger,
smiling up at the cow
whose great big eyes
brim with care
as he rests up
for the work of Christmas:

Weaning us from sin;
holding our hand as
we take those first
teetering steps in the kingdom;
clapping his hands in delight
when we whisper
'abba';
helping us to wrap up
grace, peace and joy,
re-gifting them
for the folk down
at the hopeless shelter.

From 'Gobsmacked: daily devotions for Advent', by Thom Shuman

©Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow



Prayers

Prayer

Glory, glory, glory...

To God in the highest heavens,

Glory, glory, glory, glory...

Glory with the shepherds,

The messy, outcast, unprepared shepherds;

Glory that fired them up to share the Good News;

Glory that put the Gospel into the hands

Of unexpected people;

Glory come down from the highest heavens

To the shepherds' fields.

Give us that glory today, this Christmas morn;

Put it into the hands of those who are unprepared,

Or feel themselves unworthy.

Make us feel special, new, excited,

And ready to share the good news that Christ has come.

Glory comes down again from the highest heavens

To the fields of our life and work.

Glory with Mary and Joseph,

Far from home, fearful and uncertain,

Bewildered and confused,

Yet a glory that went deep into their soul

And made them wonder at God's choosing of them;

Glory come down from the highest heavens

To Bethlehem stable.



Give us that Glory today, this Christmas morn;
 Put it into the hearts of those who are uncertain and unready,
 Or feel themselves out of things.
 Make us wonder, make us amazed, make us think deeply,
 That, in this place, Christ has come.
 Glory comes down again from the highest heavens
 To our stable where love is born anew.

Glory with the angels,
 The heavenly host, the unexpected choir;
 Glory that rang across the skies and woke up the world;
 Glory that offered unbounded praise,
 Hope to a weary people.
 Glory come down from the highest heavens
 In the angels' song

Give us that glory today, this Christmas morn;
 Let it ring out from the voices of all who rejoice,
 In songs that will change the world again because Christ has come.
 Let us be the new choir, and sing aloud of hope and peace.
 Glory comes down again from the highest heavens
 To give us the voices of angels.



Living Stones is the theme for this year's Pray Now. It was also the theme for Heart and Soul 2015. *Living Stones* is available from [St Andrew Press](#). Discounts on bulk orders are available.



A litany for Christmas Day

Leader: The Word was made flesh,

All: Alleluia! Alleluia!

Leader: And dwelt among us.

All: Alleluia! Alleluia!

Leader: Jesus, Son of the living God,
Splendour of the Father,
Light eternal,

All: Glory to you, O Lord!

Leader: Jesus, Wonderful Counsellor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Lord,

All: Glory to you, O Lord!

Leader: Jesus, Prince of Peace,
Shepherd of souls,
Perfect in holiness,

All: Glory to you, O Lord!

Leader: Jesus, Friend of all,
Protector of the poor,
Treasure of the faithful,

All: Glory to you, O Lord!

Leader: Jesus, Good Shepherd.
Inexhaustible Wisdom,
Our Way, our Truth, and our Life,



All: Glory to you, O Lord!

Leader: Jesus, joy of the angels,
Crown of all the saints,

All: Glory to you, O Lord!

Leader: Christ is born! Give hi glory!

Christ has come down from heaven! Receive him!

Christ is now on earth! Exalt him!

O earth, sing to the Lord!

O you nations, praise him in joy!

For he has been glorified!

All: Amen.

From “Book of Common Worship”, Presbyterian Church USA, 1993, published by Westminster/ John Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396, USA

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A litany for Christmas Day

Leader: All the ends of the earth

Have seen the salvation of our God.

Alleluia!

All: Shout to the Lord, all the earth. Alleluia!

Leader: O Christ, splendour of God’s eternal glory.

The mighty Word, sustaining the universe,

Renew our lives by your presence.

All: Lord, have mercy.



Leader: O Christ, born into the world in the fullness of time
For the liberation of all creation:
Release all into your promised freedom.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: O Christ, begotten of the Father before all time,
Born in a stable at Bethlehem:
May your Christ be a signs of hope and joy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: O Christ, truly God and truly human,
Born to a people in fulfilment of their expectations,
Fulfil our desires in you.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: O Christ, born of the Virgin Mary,
Child of wonder and splendour,
Mighty God of all ages, Prince of Peace:
May the whole world live in peace and justice.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: All-powerful and unseen God,
The coming of your light into the world
Has brightened weary hearts with peace.
Teach us to proclaim the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ,
Who lives and reigns with us in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, forever and ever.

All: Amen.



From “Book of Common Worship”, Presbyterian Church USA, 1993, published by Westminster/ John Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396, USA

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Sermon Ideas

Given the note at the beginning suggesting that Christmas Day worship lends itself more to family/all-age worship than the traditional ‘sermon-orientated’ style of worship familiar to us Sunday by Sunday, what follows are the suggestions for the unfolding of themes which could be appropriately utilised in a variety of ways. If a ‘sermon’ or reflection is appropriate, they will offer a structure for this. If a visual/interactive style of worship is used, they will also give a framework for this.

1. The Christmas Cracker

The interactive style

- Have someone make a giant Christmas cracker – big enough to be seen clearly by everyone (in effect, the bigger the better...)
- Talk with the children (and adults) about how Christmas crackers are used at Christmas.... whether they’ll be using any at home... and what they contain...
- If you’re bold enough (and can afford it!) provide a cracker for everyone in the church ... though this isn’t absolutely necessary...
- Draw out from people how a cracker is used and what it usually contains...
- The bang, the present inside, the joke/motto, the party hat
- Emphasise that the cracker offers us a) a surprise (the bang); b) a gift (the little present); c) something to think about (the motto etc) which we tell to one another; d) something we share in a party (the hat)
- Then turn to the giant cracker
- Involve the children in the pulling of it (several on each side, perhaps)
- When it opens, have someone primed to make a loud bang or crack (cymbals, a loud chord on the piano, a big bang...)
- Reveal what is inside...



- a baby (or some other suitable representation of birth – a baby picture, crib, etc) – this is the most important gift of all, Jesus given to us by our loving God...
- a bible – this is our story, our written Word, the message for our Christmas, which makes us think and which needs to be shared...
- streamers, hats, party-poppers – so it is a time for celebration, rejoicing, praising God for all of this...
- Christmas, therefore, is a) a surprise; b) a gift; c) a message; and d) a celebration...

The sermon

If no 'visuals' are used, the above can become a simple framework for a message, using a symbol (the cracker) with which everyone is familiar, giving us the surprise of the Incarnation; the supreme gift of God's own Son; the message of salvation which we need to share; the celebration that Christ is with us.

2. The Christmas Card

- Have someone make a giant Christmas card – big enough to be seen clearly by everyone (in effect, the bigger the better...)
- Talk with the children (and adults) about how Christmas cards are used at Christmas.... whether they've sent any or received any, or made any... and what they contain...
- If you're bold enough (and can afford it!) provide a card for everyone in the church... though this isn't absolutely necessary...
- You might also draw on the history of Christmas cards – Queen Victoria, etc...
- What do we learn?
- a) A Christmas card comes in an envelope, with a name and address on it, so that it comes to the right person.
- b) A Christmas card is bright and colourful and it's always a pleasure to open – so much so that we put it on display for everyone to see when they come to our home.
- c) A Christmas card has a message – printed or written – of love, happiness, greetings, etc – 'Merry Christmas', 'Peace and Joy', and the like.
- d) It always tells you who it's from on the inside.
- Turn now to your giant Christmas card...



- If it can be in an envelope (or if not, have something appropriate written on it) it can say “To everyone in x y Church”, or “To everybody”, or “To the whole world”.
- Message 1? The meaning and purpose of Christmas is for everyone...
- The card should have a colourful picture – Jesus, bells, angels, music, and the like.
- Message 2? Christmas is a time for celebration, the Incarnation is a cause for rejoicing, and we should share it with everyone we meet...
- The card should have a message inside – a text from the Christmas story, or the like.
- Message 3? The meaning is in the message, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” – the message is important, read it, take it in, go deeper than the tinsel and the colourful pictures...
- The card has a signature – something like “With all my Love, your loving God”.
- Message 4? The card, the gift, the message, the meaning, the purpose of Christmas has been sent, given, delivered by God. There is no doubt at all where it has all come from...

The sermon

If no ‘visuals’ are used, the above can become a simple framework for a message, using a symbol (the Christmas card) with which everyone is familiar, giving us:

- a) The recipients of the gift of the Incarnation - you, me, everyone here...
- b) The celebration of the meaning of Christ’s coming – colour, life, joy, excitement...
- c) The message of Christmas – we are loved, redemption, peace, hope ...
- d) The giver of our Christ is the Father who loves us, the originator of our salvation – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life”.



Praise

I would assume that worship leaders who might be responsible for an act of worship on Christmas morning would have access to a more than adequate resource for suitable hymns – both old and new.

So here as an addition to that resource, humbly offered out of a personal experience, which might offer a slightly new take on a familiar part of the Christmas story.

In the Spring of 2015 I was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I'd been on a similar pilgrimage two years before and was greatly looking forward to a more reflective time visiting the holy sites. On the first day of the pilgrimage we visited Bethlehem, and the group shared Communion in a cave-like chapel overlooking "The Shepherds' Fields", historically the site of the visitation of the angels to the shepherds with the Good News of Jesus' birth. Looking down over the shepherds' fields there was the authenticity of the barren hillsides, the caves and resting places of the shepherds, the poor pickings for any grazing flock. It has always been thus, as centuries of pilgrims have gazed over the Shepherds' Fields and wondered at the coming of the Good News. But in 2015 things were different. The hillsides on which we gazed were being taken over by illegal Israeli settlements; the Palestinian heritage was being destroyed and the people – shepherds and others – driven from their land; what should have been a vista to encourage prayer, reflection and wonder had been reduced to a view over a land of tension, hatred and strife.

I wrote what follows as a tribute to the shepherds of old, who left their fields on hearing the Good News of Christ's coming, and returned to their fields and shelters to share that Good News with the whole world. We are called upon to do the same and to take our Good News into a world of pain and tension, war and hatred, and proclaim "good will, and peace to everyone".

This can be used as a contemporary lesson in worship, a prayer or reflection with one of more voice, or as a hymn. If it's used as a hymn, it can be sung to any Double Common Metre tune, for example, "Forest Green" (CH4 304), "Kingsfold" (CH4 291 -1), "St Asaph" (CH4 745) or [my personal favourite for this hymn] "Noel" (CH4 303).



Shepherds' Fields

Outside the bounds of Bethlehem
The un-named shepherds roamed.
Forever on the move, they'd made
These barren hills their home.
They sheltered in the hillside caves
Where beasts and men find rest.
But God had plans for such as these:
"You shepherds will be blessed!"

For o'er the shepherds' fields they saw
A startling, glorious sight,
As angels came, released from heaven,
To offer God's new light.
Through songs of peace, with words of love,
Their God had this to say:
"The time is now! Your Christ has come!
Salvation starts today!"

And so they ran o'er rocks and sand,
Down alley-ways and lanes,
From shepherds' fields through cobbled streets
Their purpose to maintain;
The impulse of each heart their guide,
Belief a beacon clear;
'Til, at a stable, God announced:
"The Holy One is here!"

There in a humble home like theirs -
But now from heaven blessed -
They found the child, Immanuel,



The purpose of their quest.
And once again they heard the call
To share the news around,
From shepherds' fields to waiting world:
"Salvation has been found."

We too have come to Bethlehem,
Led by the angel choir,
To join with nameless shepherds here,
Our Saviour to admire.
Soon we'll be back in shepherds' fields
Our struggling flocks to tend,
But with the Good News to proclaim:
"Christ's Peace will come again!"

© Tom Gordon, 2015

(If this is to be used as a hymn in worship and printed or projected for everyone to share, an acknowledgement of the source should be made.)



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Living Stones](#) is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Tom Gordon for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

