Nativity of the Lord – Christmas Day – Year B

Sunday 25 December 2026

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr Alistair May, Principal Clerk of the Church of Scotland, for his thoughts on Christmas Day.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

At this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Introduction

I am not usually a lectionary preacher, but at Christmas the whole Church is on the same liturgical page. Advent preparation is over, and the octave of Christmas begins. Aside perhaps from Easter, this is the highest of days – when the wood of the trough prefigures the wood of the cross: the Word now made flesh. Yet, this Divine enormity often meets the reality of an exhausted preacher, and a congregation that, if it gathers at all, is seeking little more than fluffy sentiment before the family gathering.

So what lies at the heart of this day? What is our service designed to do? Do we look for a new angle into one of the nativity characters to serve as an example: be humble like Mary, joyful like a shepherd, ready to journey with a wise man?

I dare to suggest Christmas Day should be bigger than that: a focus not on the bit players, but the God who occupies the manger itself: the scandal of the incarnation. Today we worship and, whether our liturgy is simple or intricate, and however short – it should soar with angels and prophets announcing the redemption of creation: Glory, Glory, Glory to God in the Highest!

The dangers and the joys

Let's face it, most people's Christmas Day, beyond the service won't be filled with deep theological thoughts: it will be eating, drinking, friends and family. There are then two dangers for the worship leader. One is that the worship becomes sentimentalised and cute – enjoyable, but not particularly edifying. The other is that worship is essentially scolding – warning people against the dangers of materialism, indulgence and forgetting Jesus and casting a shadow over the human joy of the day. The Incarnation, however, ought to be something else: if God enters into the ordinary of Bethlehem, why not also into the festivities that follow (or equally into the disappointments and loneliness that will be the experience of some). The Word enters the world. He does not call us to retreat from it.

The focus of worship

For over 20 years I have celebrated communion in the Christmas service: short, informal, inclusive, with not a black tie in sight. I found it always broke through the sentimentality that can so easily blunt this service. Without need for a weighty sermon (or indeed much of a sermon at all) it takes us to the Cross and the Resurrection – and it invites participation in what God has done. It allowed me to keep the service light yet take us to the depths of the World made flesh. Bethlehem (*Bet Lehem*) is, literally, the house of bread.

Children were always welcome to partake, but we took the birthday cake (over which we'd previously sung to 'Happy Birthday, Jesus'), and invited any child who didn't want to take the sacrament, to have some cake in celebration of their Lord.

There was never much fuss as we celebrated the sacrament: I often served the congregation myself or asked a couple of elders or young people present.

If a Christmas communion doesn't work for you, or even if it does, another way of simply putting the incarnation at the centre of worship is to read together the ancient words of the Nicene Creed. There was something about pointing out that these 1,700-year-old words are accepted by the Church of (almost) every Christian denomination, and were very simply the early Christians saying "Yes, He was really God, and yes, He became a real human being. No ifs, no buts, no 'sort of'. (It also leads nicely into *O Come, all Ye faithful*).

Children and their toys
In many churches, children are invited to bring toys, and show them to the congregation. The tradition has the advantage of involving children, and connecting the service to the real joys of their day. But I've always been nervous of the "what did you get" mentality, the danger of exposing who got less or more, and the slight exploitation of using children to entertain adults. More recently, with fewer children often present, I've changed this into a time of asking what we are thankful for today. This allows children to speak of toys, but also includes people thankful for family, food, gatherings, a baby's first Christmas, mixed in with thanksgiving for the incarnation itself. It leads naturally into prayer.

Isaiah 9:2-7

Any other Sunday, we might take our time to contextualise this, and consider what it meant to Isaiah's first hearers, as well as what it means to read it as Christian canon. However, on Christmas Day, the Christological context must surely prevail.

But let us begin, with the briefest context. In 740 BC Ahaz, descendent of King David, was King in Jerusalem. Assyria, which had already overcome the Northern Kingdom of Israel (here called Zebulun and Naphtali and Galilee), was now coming for Jerusalem. Ahaz tried to make an alliance; to pay them off with the gold of the Temple, he'd even tried consulting mediums and spirits looking for advice. But all is darkness.

Yet, even in the darkness, a prophecy of future hope, a child will come. The immediate reference here may be Hezekiah, a worthy heir of David, who will replace the godless Ahaz, and bring a short period of peace and prosperity.

But that cannot be enough. A better time to come can bring hope. However, 2,500 years later the problem is evident: there is always another enemy, another failed ruler, another time of darkness. The noble Hezekiah will afterwards be replaced by the evil King Manasseh, and so the cycle goes on. As in the days when Gideon defeated the Midianites (v4), the joy is temporary – because the problem requires more than a change of human government.

Christian hope cannot simply be another momentary time of release. These are useless unless they point prophetically, as we must surely read Isaiah as pointing to God, and Godself coming as saviour.

And here, on Christmas Day, we can only let the soaring poetry lift our hearts in hope, as well as our lips in praise: a child is given, and the task of bringing ultimate order, mercy and justice, falls on Him. All times of hope point forward and back, to this one moment in history, this one day, when this child who is called "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" comes. This release is not momentary, for it comes "from that time and forever", for it is God's zeal and not ours that does it.

John 1:1-14

Before exegeting this passage, again don't miss its poetic resonance. In a shorter service simply reading it well might be enough. It soars and lifts us both in its majestic language and the vastness of its themes – yet, like the incarnation itself it comes to us in its strange familiarity.

While Mark starts the story with John the Baptist, Matthew's genealogy takes us back to Abraham, and Luke's to Adam, John begins at the beginning itself. He is from the beginning: the Word with God before all things. The echoes of Genesis must not be missed: even before the incarnation, the revelation of the Logos reframes our understanding of Creation itself, indeed our understanding of Godself.

Nothing is outside this Word: not life, nor human purpose, nor understanding, let alone rebirth and redemption. Yet, plopped into the midst of this lofty poetry is John. He is not the Messiah: and, like Luke's shepherds or Matthew's wise men, must not become the focus of the story. They, like us, are mere witnesses of what God in Christ is doing.

For this Christmas Day, let the Word lift the congregation, and know that no superlatives the preacher may use, and no Christmas music, not even the majesty of Handel's Messiah

itself (if you need a track for the service), can adequately extol the Word of the mystery. As the Nicene Creed hammers home: only Son, eternally begotten, God from God, begotten not made, *homoousios* (of one substance with the Father), through whom all things in heaven and on earth were made.

All-age game

Print and cut small cards featuring familiar Christmas images: trees, Christmas dinners, shepherds, wise men, angels, stars, and **one baby in a manger**. (I generally found around six images printed on A4 paper worked). Scatter or hide them around the worship space before the service.

Divide the volunteers (energetic children, willing adults) into two or more teams to find and gather as many cards as possible within a time limit. Have each team then sit with paper and pen (or track it publicly on a flipchart). Reveal the point values one image at a time, letting the score climb steadily:

- **Tree:** 1 pt
- **Christmas Dinner:** 2 pts
- **Shepherd:** 5 pts
- **Wise Man:** 10 pts
- **Star:** 20 pts
- **Angel:** 50 pts

Once the teams think the contest is close – or already won, declare the value of the manger card: **1,000,000 points**.

The game doesn't dismiss the secular or seasonal items – they all score points and are part of the joy of the day. Be affirming! But the sudden, absurd leap to one million points drives home the core message: all the food, gifts, traditions, and even the messengers point to the one gift of infinite worth – the Word made flesh. Jesus changes everything. Have we found him?

Prayers

- **Christmas Day quotations – *possible Calls to worship***

"Like your landlord becoming your lodger,
Like your managing director up before you for an interview

Like Beethoven queuing up for a ticket to his own concert
Like a headmaster getting the belt
Like a good architect living in a slum built by a rival
Like Picasso painting by numbers –
God lived among us." *(Steve Turner)*

"Dearly beloved, today our Saviour is born; let us rejoice. Sadness should have no place on the birthday of life. The fear of death has been swallowed up; life brings us joy with the promise of eternal happiness." *(Pope Leo the Great, Sermon on the Nativity, mid-5th century)*

"This is the reason why we celebrate this day: that we may remember and firmly believe that Christ has come down to us, and that we have received Him. Therefore, let everyone look to it that he does not let this day pass by as a mere historical event, but grasps it as a present reality: that God is born for you today." *(Martin Luther, Christmas Day Sermon, 1521)*

"The open secret, the wonder of all wonders, is that God's way leads Him – and us – to the manger... God does not stay in His heaven, distant and aloof. He steps right into our human reality, down into our darkness and our captivity." *(Karl Barth, Sermon preached on December 25, 1957 (Deliverance to the Captives))*

- **The Nicene Creed**

Leader: We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
and of all things, visible and invisible.

All: **And in one Lord Jesus Christ,**
the only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of the Father before all worlds

Group 1: God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God;
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father,
by whom all things were made.

Group 2: Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,

and was made human.

Leader: And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered and was buried.

Group 1: And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven,
and sits on the right hand of the Father.

Group 2: And He shall come again, with glory,
to judge both the living and the dead;
whose kingdom shall have no end.

All: **And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son;
who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified;
who spoke by the prophets.**

Leader: And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church;

Group 1: We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;

Group 2: And we look for the resurrection of the dead;

All: **And the life of the world to come. Amen.**

- **Call to worship:**

Hear the Good News:
Jesus Christ is born!

Lift up your voices:
Jesus Christ is born!

The darkness is broken
Jesus Christ is born!

We are not alone
Jesus Christ is born!

Glory to God in the highest
Peace on Earth!

- **Prayer of approach**

As angels sang Glory to God
awakening Creation itself

As shepherds came to see a saviour
and returned rejoicing

As wise men travelled, prepared to worship
and left transformed

And as stars proclaimed the King's arrival,
and the universe recognised its maker,
so we come this morning to offer You our praise.

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,
Word of God,
with God and of God,
Who was from the beginning,
and through whom all came to be,
in whose image we are each created,

You came as a baby
in the humility of a peasant,
coming to serve,
as one born to die.

You emptied Yourself
that we might be filled with all eternity.

You came in the obscurity of a small town,
and in the poverty of the manger,
that at Your mighty name
every knee should bow and every tongue confess
that You are Lord, who brings Glory to the Father.

Lord, on this day of gladness,
we too bow to worship
and to confess to You, Lord
that we need You.
For we have too often forgotten,
too often disobeyed,
too often met Your gift with our ingratitude.

And so today
as we gaze on the wonder of the manger,
aware of the cost You paid for us,
we ask for Your forgiveness again
that we might delight in grace and mercy.

Let this time of worship
remind us that You God, are with us
and let it flow into the joy of this whole day of celebration.

As we sing with the whole Church in heaven and across the earth –
Glory to God in the Highest
and peace upon the Earth
Amen

- **Communion prayer**

The Lord *is* with you
Our God is with us
So we lift our hearts to Him.

Lord Jesus,
In the beginning, You were there.
As the Spirit hovered over the waters, You were there.
As the Father made everything, You were there.
When the angels first sang,
when the stars first sparkled,
when the first person took the first breath,
You were there.

And when we needed You, You came to us.
When we turned away from You, You turned towards us.
Born like us, born for us.
Sent by the Father in the power of the Spirit
God with us,
You came not in majesty, but in humility,
God with us.
Word made flesh.
Light in our darkness.

And so,
as the angels sang that day:
"Glory to God in the highest"
we come, with all Your people, singing:

Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

We thank You that You were born among us.
We thank You that You grew up like us.
We thank You that You spoke truth to us.
We thank You that You died for us
and rose again, that we too might rise.

And so, as we eat, remembering Your body broken
and drink, remembering Your blood poured out,
we wonder at this birth of blood and flesh
and at Your giving it up for us.

So send Your Spirit down this Christmas Day
on these gifts You give,
that we might know Your presence here this day,
as shepherds, angels, and wise men knew it that day.

Through Christ born for us,
with Christ who died for us,
in Christ who rose for us,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all Glory be to You, almighty Father
Amen

(Share the bread and the wine)

Musical suggestions

God Welcomes All (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music and words-only versions are now available; and digital resources, including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all

Our online music resource is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the Songs for Sunday blog from Trinity College Glasgow.

You are almost certainly going to want to restrict yourself to hymns well known to the congregation.

- A suggested playlist of songs from CH4 for Christmas can be found on the Church of Scotland website (Christmas) and in GWA 99-105

- GWA 38 – “In the beginning was the Word”
- GWA 90 – “We are a people of hope”
- GWA 99 – “Joy has dawned upon the world”

- GWA 100 – “Adore” (You stepped down from heaven)
- GWA 101 – “Carol of the least child” (There is no child so small)
- GWA 102 – “A weary couple lodged within a stable”
- GWA 103 – “O little town of Bethlehem” (O sad and troubled Bethlehem)
- GWA 105 – “Christe, Lux Mundi” (Christ, You are light)

- CH4 306 – “O come, all ye faithful”
- CH4 320 – “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”
- O Come, All You Unfaithful – Bob Kauflin, Lisa Clow (2020) suitable for gathering, or communion: available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-QHbpYjuIg
- Like a Candle Flame – Graham Kendrick – available on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teZaQUKjx24

- From the squalor of a borrowed stable – Stuart Townend – available on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YksTeR61O1I

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.

- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
  Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/ intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
  What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
  Did it function well as a whole?
  How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
  What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
  Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/ community?
  How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
  How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

God Welcomes All can be ordered from Hymns Ancient & Modern

The Church of Scotland

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship here

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