

Sunday 1 January 2012

10 a.m.

Laurieston Parish Church
Morning Worship for New Year's Day

Welcome/Notices

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Introit: Christ is our Light (Hy. 336, vv 1 & 3)

Christ is our light! the bright and morning star
covering with radiance all from near and far.
Christ be our light, shine on, shine on we pray
into our hearts, into our world today.

Christ is our joy! transforming wedding guest!
Through water turned to wine the feast was blessed.
Christ be our joy; your glory let us see,
as your disciples did in Galilee.

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Call to Worship: **A child is born!**
 A child to save us
 A child to challenge us
 A child for the whole world.
 We share the news with great joy!

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HYMN 320: Joy to the world

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 Incarnation: The Sequel
 OR
 What happened next, to....

- ◆ so here we are, the morning after the night before;
- ◆ the Sunday after the big day that all the waiting and planning and expectation were all about

- ◆ the rest of the life after the birth of the child
- ◆ what happened after the 'Happily Ever After' of the fairy tale?

If, like us, you have been watching lots of rubbish on television in the past week, you will have seen lots of films, and their many sequels.

We watched Shrek 1, 2 & 3 in the space of three days. It's good because it turns some of the traditional fairy-tale elements on their head:

- ◆ the ogres choose to stay ugly and love each other as they are;
- ◆ the prince goes back to being a frog;
- ◆ the Fairy Godmother is the baddy
- ◆ and Prince Charming is anything but.

He keeps pouting and saying 'I want my happily ever after'
And, of course, in real life, unlike fairy tales, there is no such thing

We had the interesting experience on Christmas Day of watching The Snowman with an Australian girl who had never seen it before. Her verdict? She said she loved the film, but didn't like the ending at all.

The Nativity stories in the Bible are not exactly fairy tales, but they are closer to that than to historical record. And the important thing is that the story doesn't end with the birth of the child in the manger, and the visit of foreign kings. That is where the story BEGINS.

The Christmas story in the gospels is, in fact, a PREQUEL to the life of the grown-up Jesus, the impact he made on the world, the death he died: the Easter story and its amazing SEQUELS which are still being produced every time someone is drawn into the

ongoing story of this child, who, in some way that we can't quite explain, is God's own presence among us.

But that's taking us far further than we want to go this morning: the Sunday after Christmas; the start of a New Year.

Today we're going to stay with the characters who finally assembled in our Nativity scene last week, and ask 'what happened next' for the Shepherds, the Wise Men, the Innkeeper's Wife. To borrow the title of another TV programme, "What happened after they were famous?"

And then the much more important question, for us to take away and think about on our own...

What happens next for us?

Are we just the same until we go through the whole sequence again next year - Christingle, Taste of Christmas, Carol Service, Nativity, Watchnight Service, Christmas Day - sigh of relief that it's all over?

How are we different for having celebrated this birth?

How is the world different for this child being part of it?

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EXTRA HYMN 316: Love came down at Christmas

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... THE SHEPHERDS

- ◆ Let's start with the shepherds. What happened next for them?
- ◆ This is all that Luke has to say (Luke 2: 20):

The shepherds went back, singing praises to God for all they had heard and seen. It had been just as the angel had told them.

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- ◆ I had a slightly embarrassing moment last week in the Woollen Mill at the Deer Centre near Cupar:
- ◆ was wandering round for a long time, looking for bargains in the sale, and when I finally took my purchases to the counter, the assistant said how much she had enjoyed my singing
- ◆ apparently I had not just been singing along to the Christmas carols on tape, but singing in harmony!

- ◆ Was that what it was like for the shepherds, I wonder, when they got back home and just couldn't stop singing?
- ◆ And if so, how did other people react?
- ◆ What did they tell their friends and families?
- ◆ How DO you explain an encounter with angels without sounding totally mad?
- ◆ Did they talk to their grandchildren about it in later years?
- ◆ They wouldn't have any photos; or video footage on their iphone, but had they brought a souvenir... some pieces of straw from the stable?

- ◆ We are not told what happened next to the shepherds; they have played their part in the story.
- ◆ Did they spend the rest of their lives looking up to the sky wondering if angels would appear again?
- ◆ Was their ordinary life a bit dull - a disappointment - after all that had happened to them; or was it enough to have been there.. to have been part of it all?

- ◆ Did they follow what happened to the child as he grew up?
- ◆ There's no record of any shepherd becoming disciples of Jesus, but it's not impossible that they were there among the crowds on the hillside or by the lake
- ◆ Were any of them there, watching, at the cross, as he died?

- ◆ of course, this is all complete fantasy
- ◆ what matters is not real-life shepherds, if there were any, but the part they play in the story
- ◆ And the shepherds have a very important part to play: to emphasise the humble nature of Jesus' birth, and the fact that the Good News is for everyone - rich and poor alike.

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Reading: 1 Corinthians 1: 26 - 31 p. 206

Now remember what you were, my brothers, when God called you. From the human point of view few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing. God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful. He chose what the world looks down on and despises, and thinks is nothing, in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. This means that no one can boast in God's presence. But God has brought you into union with Christ Jesus, and God has made Christ to be our wisdom. by him we are put right with God; we become God's holy people and are set free. So then, as the scripture says, "Whoever wants to boast must boast of what the Lord has done."

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Meditation: Shepherd

Until that night, I could not fit the size of God into my head.
 I thought he was a God for prophets and kings,
 men of words and wisdom.
 But that night I found myself looking at God made small,
 small enough for me,
 small enough to pick up and hold like a lamb.
 I could not talk to God in the clouds,
 but that night when I looked and smiled
 and talked nonsense to that tiny thing,
 I knew that I was talking to God.

And it was God who smiled back at me and waved his perfect hands in delight.

That night in your smallness, God, you seemed bigger and more powerful to me than you ever did before.

I can hold you now, hold you in my head

and hold you in my arms,

and know that you are holding me in yours.

Lisa Dobney, in ed. Ruth Burgess, Hay & Stardust, Wild Goose, 2005, p. 25 (altered)

Prayer

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Ruth Burgess, Hay & Stardust, p. 19

Here we are, Lord;

we are not many, nor are we very wise, or powerful,

nor rich by the standards of the world,

but we do come, joyful and triumphant at this special time,

because of what you have done.

Here and now, we remember your promises

that you will never leave us nor forsake us;

that you would show your love for us in a very special way;

that you would always let us know that you love us,

despite all our fears.

Here and now, we joyfully remember you

creeping in very quietly and very vulnerably among us

in Jesus Christ, born of Mary.

Born to be with us;

born to love us; born to free us; born to save us.

Please forgive us for forgetting all this so often;

for thinking of you in human terms;

for imagining you to be a fearsome far-off sort of God,

angry and vengeful;

or thinking of you as a petulant parent,
rewarding us with sweets when we are good
and smacking us when we are bad.

Forgive us for blaming you when things go wrong,
and ignoring you when we think we are in control;
for being so busy and caught up in our own concerns
that we don't even take time
to stop and listen to yours.

Help us, as we remember your birth,
and reflect on the manner of it,
to let you enter our lives.
Speak your word of power in our hearts
and change us, once again.

AMEN

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HYMN 318: Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour

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.... **THE WISE MEN**

- ◆ And so we come to the Wise Men, who don't actually arrive until Friday, but we'll forget about that for now.
- ◆ Again, there is very little in the Gospel account (Matthew's gospel this time) to tell us what happened to them 'after they were famous' (Matthew 2: 12):

Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.

- ◆ They had no sat-nav, but would have no difficulty finding another way home, using their knowledge of the stars

- ◆ what was it like for them, I wonder, after they returned to their home-land... in Persia, or Babylon... modern-day Iran and Iraq?
- ◆ Did they go on studying the stars/ looking for signs, even though they knew they would never find anything so remarkable again?
- ◆ Did they write up their experience, and submit it to the Persian Journal of Astrology?
- ◆ Or did they keep quiet about what happened, and only talk about it among themselves... or ponder it all in their hearts, like Mary did?
- ◆ Did their journey change them in any way? Did it change the direction of their lives?
- ◆ They don't appear again in the gospels - they have played their part.
- ◆ They didn't become Jews, or move to Judea; they kept to their own faith,
- ◆ but did it change their priorities at all; change their thoughts about what really mattered and what didn't?
- ◆ did they feel at all embarrassed about the richness of their gifts for a child born in poverty?
- ◆ Did they feel at all guilty about the fury their visit unleashed, and the dreadful toll of lives of Hebrew children?

- ◆ Of course, all of this is fantasy.
- ◆ What matters is not the Wise Men, if there were any, but the part that they play in the story,
- ◆ and their part is to highlight the global significance of Jesus' birth - this was a child, not just for the Jews, but for all nations
- ◆ and that is all the more remarkable, coming, as it does, in Matthew's gospel, written for a community of Jewish Christians.

- ◆ Matthew's readers would have known their Bibles inside out, and when they heard about the Wise Men would certainly have remembered this passage from Isaiah:

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Reading: Isaiah 60: 1-6 Future glory of Jerusalem p. 722

Arise, Jerusalem, and shine like the sun;
the glory of the Lord is shining on you!
Other nations will be covered by darkness,
but on you the light of the Lord will shine;
the brightness of his presence will be with you.
Look around you and see what is happening;
your people are gathering to come home!
Your sons will come from far away;
your daughters will be carried like children.
You will see this and be filled with joy;
you will tremble with excitement.
The wealth of nations will be brought to you;
from across the sea their riches will come.
Great caravans of camels will come,
from Midian and Ephah.
They will come from Sheba, bringing gold and incense.
People will tell the good news of what the Lord has done!

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Prayer: Mystery God Glendon Macaulay, D, M & D, p. 41

**MYSTERY GOD,
WE WILL NEVER KNOW ALL ABOUT YOU;
WHO AND WHAT YOU ARE;
HOW AND WHY YOU EXIST;
ALL THE WAYS AND MEANS THAT YOU ARE LOVE.
SUCH IS YOUR GREATNESS
THAT WE CAN ONLY CATCH GLIMPSES OF YOU.
BECAUSE WE ARE NOT GODS, BUT HUMAN,**

**IN OUR LIMITATION WE FIND IT IMPOSSIBLE
TO KNOW ALL OF YOU.**

But we do know you treasure us as your own,
because we are your very own,
made and meant by you.

And we know too
that you long for us to be free of ourselves;
transformed people; changed people.
YOU EVEN CAME YOURSELF TO SHOW US HOW.

Joy of heaven, and now to earth come down,
empower us to go even beyond the second mile
in our caring.

**CHILD OF BETHLEHEM, LOVE DIVINE,
SHOW US HOW TO STRUGGLE WITH OURSELVES,
SO THAT WE ARE PREPARED TO STRIVE
TO GIVE EVEN MORE OF WHO WE ARE.**

Man of Calvary, all-compassion,
because of your forgiveness
we can learn how to forgive each other.
We can even learn how to forgive ourselves.

**AND SO, THIS MYSTERIOUS BIRTH OF YOURS
BRINGS SALVATION AND NEW LIFE,
SO THAT WE AND ALL YOUR WORLD BECOME A NEW CREATION,
AND YOUR KINGDOM BECOMES ESTABLISHED HERE ON EARTH.**

So will you encourage us to strive for something of your divinity:
to be conscious of our potential in this new year?
And as we turn the corner of new and exciting tomorrows,
help us to embrace your future gladly,

and welcome all it offers with a spirit of hope. AMEN

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HYMN 327: Brightest and best of the sons of the morning

.....
... THE CHILDREN

And now we come to the darkest part of the story;
the hardest part to think about;
What happened to the children?
Not just Jesus, but all the little boys, two years old and younger,
who were lost while he and his parents escaped to freedom?

Here, we have a lot more detail in Matthew's Gospel:
Matthew 2: 13 - 15

An angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and said, "Herod will be looking for the child in order to kill him. So get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you to leave. Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and left during the night for Egypt, where he stayed until Herod died. This was done to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, 'i called my Son out of Egypt.

Matthew 3: 16 - 18

When Herod realised that the visitors from the East had tricked him, he was furious. He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its neighbourhood who were two years old and younger - this was done in accordance with what he had learned from the visitors about the time when the star had appeared. In this way what the prophet Jeremiah had said came true:

***A sound is heard in Ramah,
the sound of bitter weeping.
Rachel is crying for her children;
she refuses to be comforted,
for they are dead.***

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- ◆ We spoke last week about the innkeeper and his wife - not mentioned in the Bible, but someone, somewhere in Bethlehem, took the young couple in and gave them a place to stay.
- ◆ How did they feel afterwards, when the soldiers came?
- ◆ How did they feel about having sheltered the child who was the cause of it all?
- ◆ Was theirs one of the little boys one of the innocents lost?
- ◆ Was his one life worth all these deaths?

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Song: Ian Fraser

Your child's coming was my child's going,
Mary, Mary;
Swift appeared the soldier band,
children's blood spilled on the sand;
Grief and rage convulsed the land: Mary, Mary,
Was your child born
that Rachel weep forlorn?

Your child's living was my child's dying:
Mary, Mary
Days hang loose like cloth unshrunk,
nights are haunted, anguish-sunk,
breasts are pained, the milk not drunk:
Mary, Mary
Was your child worth
Mine laid in friendless earth?

Your child's saving was my child's destroying:
Mary, Mary
Cherished limbs have lost their power;

cherished hopes have now turned sour,
cherished seed will not find flower: Mary, Mary
If Jesus saves,
what mean to you these graves?

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- ◆ There's no historical evidence that a mass slaughter of children took place in Judea at this time.
- ◆ It's place in the story is to remind readers of the Exodus;
- ◆ to show Jesus as the new Moses, the who will lead his people to freedom
- ◆ but it also places the story of Jesus very firmly in the real world, where such terrible things do happen
- ◆ where children are slaughtered - by cruel dictators, or natural disaster or disease - and ordinary people have to try to make sense of it all,
- ◆ asking the all-important question, "Where is God in this?"

- ◆ Interestingly enough, the passage quoted from Jeremiah in Matthew's gospel has a much more hopeful ring to it:

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Reading: Jeremiah 31: 15-17 Rachel, weeping p. 765
The Lord says, "A sound is heard in Ramah, the sound of bitter weeping. Rachel is crying for her children; they are gone, and she refuses to be comforted. Stop your crying and wipe away your tears. All that you have done for your children will not go unrewarded. They will return from the enemy's land. There is hope for your future; your children will come back home. I, the Lord, have spoken."

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Prayer

Ruth Burgess, in Hay and Stardust, Wild Goose, 2005, p. 180

When children are abused,
YOU SHARE OUR ANGER.
When children are in pain,
YOU SHARE OUR DISTRESS.
When children are murdered,
YOU SHARE OUR HORROR
When children die,
YOU SHARE OUR DESPAIR

God, who welcomes and cherishes children,
we bring you our prayers.

We pray for children living and dying
in places of fear and violence;
for children dying of hunger and disease.
We pray for children who have been abducted
from their homes;
for children who are pawns in political games.
We pray for children who are tortured and abused;
for children whose lives are short and full of pain.
We pray for parents who have to watch their children die;
for parents who are unable to keep their children safe.
We pray for children and parents and gardens in our midst;
for all who love them and support them.

God of earth and heaven,
in times of pain and in times of plenty,
we seek your blessing.
Lay your hands on us in love
and give good gifts to your children.
In Jesus' name and in the love of the Holy Spirit we pray. AMEN

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HYMN 331: Unto us a boy is born

.....
.... and lastly, OURSELVES

- ◆ the Christmas story, also speaks of the VULNERABILITY of God
- ◆ Jesus might not have made it - through the birth; through the violence; through the long journeys
- ◆ God is the great RISK-TAKER, and invites us to take the risk of following him

- ◆ what does it mean for us to have lived through the Christmas story?
- ◆ Are we in any way changed by what we have seen and heard?

- ◆ that is largely up to us - and it depends on how far we have grasped the essential truth of the Christmas story
- ◆ which has nothing to do with angels, or shepherds, or innkeepers, or kings
- ◆ but with the amazing assertion that God has come to be with his people
- ◆ the great God, creator of heaven and earth, has stepped in to the human story and become part of it
- ◆ and invites us to become part of the story of the world's healing and recreation - behold, I make all things new.

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Meditation: Occasional Sightings of the Gospel

**WHEN I AM LONELY,
WONDERING IF I HAVE A FRIEND IN THE WORLD,
IT EMBRACES ME WITH ITS COMFORT.**

When I am prone to ignore the world,
it pushes me into its delights.

When I wander the streets of today's culture,
it shadows me to keep me out of trouble.

**WHEN I THINK THAT I HAVE NO RESPONSIBILITIES
FOR THOSE AROUND ME,
IT GRABS ME AND SHAKES ME.**

When I am broken by the suffering
of those I love,
it caresses me with its peace.

**WHEN I STRUT MY ARROGANT PRIDE,
IT SHATTERS ME INTO HUMILITY.**

Whenever I need a Word,
God provides it.

Thom Shuman in ed. Ruth Burgess, Hay & Stardust, Wild Goose, 2005, p. 61

Offering

Choir Voluntary:

Lord Jesus Christ (MP 435, vv. 1,3 &4)

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LET US PRAY:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses (*debts*)
as we forgive those who trespass against us. (*our debtors*)
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. AMEN

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HYMN 295: Who would think that what was needed?

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Benediction: Glendon Macaulay, D, M & D, p. 41

WHEN THE STAR IN THE SKY DISAPPEARS,
when the shepherds go back to their hillsides,
WHEN THE WISE MEN RETURN TO WHEREVER THEY CAME FROM,
then the real work of Christmas begins.
GOD BLESS US, AND KEEP ON SAFE
ON THIS DAY, ON ALL DAYS,
IN ALL THE TIME TO COME.
And may the blessing....

Sung Amen