

Sunday 3rd January 2021

The Moderator's Service

Worship conducted by The Moderator of the General Assembly with contributions from

- Moderator's Chaplain, Catherine Beattie
- George Whyte, The Principal Clerk
- Jo Love of the Wild Goose Resource Group
- Neil Ferguson, elder at Martin's Memorial Church,. Stornoway
- Bethany Pringle, 1st Year candidate for the ministry
- Music from Ferryhill Virtual Choir, Aberdeen, Perthshire Churches led by Ruth Rankin, and organist, Calum Gubby, Liberton Kirk, Edinburgh

Welcome and Call to Worship

Good morning everyone and welcome to worship.

Well, everything was different this Christmas and yet everything was the same - the truth that Jesus Christ came into the world, Immanuel. And that's what we've been celebrating and will continue to do so. I know it's January but January is the darkest of months; we need all the light we can get! And so our praise today will still very much have a Christmas ring to it.

I want to thank everybody who has contributed to this worship service today, so willingly and ably. Thank you to them and most of all, thanks be to God for the gift of Christ.

Let us then worship God together!

Opening Praise: Once in Royal David's City

Once in royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her Baby
In a manger for His bed:
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little Child.

He came down to earth from heaven,
Who is God and Lord of all,
And His shelter was a stable,
And His cradle was a stall;
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,
Lived on earth our Saviour holy.

And our eyes at last shall see Him,
Through His own redeeming love;
For that Child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above,
And He leads His children on
To the place where He is gone.

Not in that poor lowly stable,
With the oxen standing by,
We shall see Him; but in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high;
When like stars His children crowned
All in white shall wait around.

Prayer

Eternal and Loving God,
as the calendars change
and the days move on
you are with us.

Unchanging,
timeless.

As we look ahead
to the year to come ,
the path seems foggy,
you are with us,
guiding the way,
shining your light
that overpowers all darkness.

We can be certain
that you will never leave us.

Father,
you created us
to be in perfect
trusting relationship with you.
Your son Jesus Christ
has entered the world for us
and we can be sure as we walk,
your spirit guides us
and is with us.

We are, Father,
totally wrapped up
in your loving care
yet we confess
that sometimes
we still choose to turn away.

There are times
when we try to take
control of our lives
and we close our eyes
to the safe paths
that you have prepared
for us to walk.

We ask your forgiveness
and our trust returns.

You turn us back
towards the star
that guides our way.
We are provided certainty
that this forgiveness
will be given
through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord God
we trust in your promises
for they are eternal
when we cannot be sure
of what the next day
or minute
or hour will bring,
still we can be sure of you.

And let the peace
that ultimate trust brings,
fill our hearts
as we step forward
into a new year.

We ask this
through Jesus Christ
our saviour.
Amen

Bible Readings

Psalm 147:12-20

Extol the Lord, Jerusalem;
praise your God, Zion.
He strengthens the bars of your gates
and blesses your people within you.
He grants peace to your borders
and satisfies you with the finest of wheat.
He sends his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
He spreads the snow like wool
and scatters the frost like ashes.
He hurls down his hail like pebbles.
Who can withstand his icy blast?
He sends his word and melts them;
he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow.
He has revealed his word to Jacob,
his laws and decrees to Israel.
He has done this for no other nation;
they do not know his laws.

Praise the Lord.

Reflection on Psalm 147

Well Jo, didn't that sound great, Neil reading Psalm 147 in the Gaelic. I'm not sure why, because I don't speak one word of Gaelic but I love the sound of it but it almost has a spiritual quality to it. Do you find that?

Absolutely Martin and just to hear, to hear the Bible read in it, with the music of another language and to know that's a language of our own land here and all the connections with the land and the words and the poetry of it and just to soak that up even though you don't know each word, yeah, it's an experience and a good experience

I love how you described it there, the music of the language and it has got that about it, for sure. Now as I said Neil was reading the final parts of Psalm 147 and Jo I know you have reflected on that Psalm. Would you want to share a wee bit about what you find in these verses?

Well first of all Martin, I think what apt verses for winter days with the snow, frost, hail, cold, wind and God being in charge of them all. And it's a Psalm that takes us back to a time, probably before the exile from Jerusalem and her people, the beneficiaries of God, God's protecting and blessing and feeding and peace building. There is a tender note in there too being sounded with the mention of the children, the little ones in society. In contrast to Jeremiah whose words we will also hear today, words that were rejected, but here the words of God, revealed to Israel, is regarded as a gift solely for her. Israel alone among the nations knows God's laws and instructions and this is seen as reason for praise and there is no edge of composity or superiority there. So I see the sentiments of the whole Psalm as well as these closing verses conveying a sense of peace time and relative security. There is a call to praise being addressed to the people and the Psalmist calls up many good reasons for that praise. And twice, he speaks of God's words going out like a swift runner and able to melt hailstones. I think these are superb physical images as we say the word made flesh as good poetry does it best. So it makes me think, what calls forth our praise at this year's beginning? Which of God's laws or commandments are feeling like a blessing to us today? We might even take time this week to write in our own words maybe a short poem depicting God's words going out. What is it like? How does it behave? What poetry describes the effect God's words has on us?

Wow, thanks Jo for just finding such wonder in these lines and inviting us all the more into them, that we might appropriate them and take them into the year with us. Thank you for that Jo and might I just wish you every blessing on your work with Wild Goose and everything you do in this coming year. Thanks Jo.

Thanks Martin, and to you.

John 1:10-18

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth

came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Sermon

A quick google reveals that Epiphany always falls on the 6th January... this Wednesday. The same search suggests that Epiphany is one of the three main Christian festivals. I'm not sure what that says about Pentecost - which in my book is right up the list - but I do agree that we should certainly not ignore Epiphany.

Of course, in specific terms Epiphany celebrates the coming of the magi - the wise men - and therefore, through them, the manifestation of Christ to the gentile world.

Most scholars accept that the coming of the magi was some time after the birth so it's no bad thing that we recognise their part a little after Christmas Day itself.

But the word 'epiphany' takes us further than that specific happening.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines 'epiphany' as *'a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand, or suddenly become conscious of, something that is very important to you.'*

As someone who doesn't struggle to let my imagination run, I think in terms of epiphany lots. Whether on the hills or walking the beach, there are often moments when the sun bursts through the clouds, for example, and it always feels to me like an epiphany - a revelation, a demonstration - and certainly a moment when I become conscious of *'something that is very important to me.'*

What is that? Nothing less than God. And that God is there. And yes that the heavens are declaring the glory of God!

Of course this gets to the very nature of who God is. From the beginning, God has been in the business of making himself known. The creation itself is the outworking of this truth; that 'God said...' that God spoke and there was something rather than nothing. We call it revelation - this sense in which God is made known.

Listen. There are certainly times when there is a seeming silence from the heavens. In Isaiah, we find the Lord asking, 'Was I not silent for a long time?' and in Samuel, we read, 'In those days the word of the Lord was rare...'

Maybe you've known something of that silence?
Maybe you've felt your prayers to be bouncing back at you... un-answered?
Maybe you've been in anguish about who you are, or why you're here, or what the point is... and you've sensed no answer?
Maybe in these last nine months - maybe right now - you're asking, 'Where is God?'
It's okay if you are. Sometimes the silence is deafening.

But the big picture is of revelation - the voice of God going out.

And how is it heard? Through what means is this voice discerned? By what means does God reveal God's being and nature and character and purpose?

First of all in what God has made.

The Psalmist writes, 'The heavens declare the glory of God. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they MAKE HIM KNOWN.'

And Paul writes that, 'what may be known about God is plain, because God has made it plain. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities —his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.'

So there is something of God's unveiling in the mountain and in the ocean and in the stars at night and in the desert and forest and in the birds and beasts.

Secondly, God has put something of the divine spark - something of himself - in each one of us... that we might know him. There's a leaning in that direction, something of the law written on every heart. The writer of Ecclesiastes puts it beautifully: 'He has planted eternity in the human heart.'

And God reveals more of the divine nature through anointed prophets, tasked with saying, 'Thus says the Lord.' The apostle Peter writes 'We have the prophetic message as something completely reliable... like a light shining in a dark place.'

All that we might know God. All that we might see. All that we might become conscious. All that we might find ourselves singing, 'Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here' and find ourselves seeing the 'glory of the Lord shining all around.'

But supremely, most of all, God makes himself known in Jesus. Jesus is the complete revelation - nothing needing added or subtracted.

In the wonderful prologue to his gospel, John tells us that no one has ever seen God but that the Son - that is Jesus - has made him known.

In Colossians, Paul says much the same by declaring Jesus to be the 'image of the invisible God.'

And in Hebrews, the same truth, that, 'Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.'

Which is all to say that God wants to be known! That in Jesus, we can say 'we have seen the Father.'

When he was about three or four, our middle son, Andrew, asked us, 'What colour is God?' Elaine, the primary teacher, answered, 'God can be any colour you want him to be.' Andrew was quite satisfied with that answer. But if he had asked, 'What is God like?' we wouldn't have answered so vaguely. We would have answered much more fully because we know what God is like - Jesus has made him known.

So, you want to know what God is like? Look to Jesus. Remember the dictionary definition of 'epiphany?' 'a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand, or suddenly become conscious of, something that is very important to you.'

There is that moment when seeing Jesus, we suddenly feel that we've understood - perhaps because we have understood! And when we suddenly become conscious of that which is important...

This, when we see Jesus.

The boy born at Bethlehem.

The lad in the Temple with the teachers of the Law.

The young Rabbi calling the fishermen.

The preacher, the teacher, the prophet, the healer.

The comforter - and the confronter... the turner of tables.

The friend of sinners.

The giver of sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, peace to the troubled.

The one who, when on trial, would only say, 'so you say.'

The one who went silently.

The one who bore the nails and wore only a crown of thorns.

The one who bled and died and gave up his Spirit and breathed his last and declared, 'It is finished.'

And yes, the One whom God raised from the dead to ascend and to reign forever.

This Jesus. And in this Jesus is God made known.

The magi were the first from afar who drew near and saw for themselves.

What about you? Would you gaze on Jesus? Would you see for yourself?

At the start of a new year, is there ANYTHING that you would wish for more than for that revelation of the divine?

Jesus has come. Jesus is here. That you might know God.

Prayers

Eternal God, as we come to a new year and wonder about the meaning of time, we pray that you would be with us as travel with one another in these strange lockdown days. As we do so we ask for a heart of wisdom. As we reflect upon all of the endless possibilities of creation we are overwhelmed that you gently called each one of us into being. That we were known to you before our birth, that you gave us a name, that you made us all in our own uniqueness. We give thanks for your word made flesh among us.

Bless your church
that it may grow in love for you,
that it may grow holiness,
That it may grow in size.
We remember before you
All who reach out in mission
to tell of your love and saving power.

Darkness covers the earth and its people,
but the radiance of God's Light
burns away its shadows,
illuminates the smallest corner,
and heralds in the start
of a new dawn,

where hearts no longer fear,
souls might be set free,
and sister shall follow brother,
nation shall follow nation,
and kings and princes bow down in awe
before the one who comes to reign.!

We pray for our communities -
that snapshot of humanity
with all ages, backgrounds,
education,
politics and religious viewpoint
who are our neighbours
in the streets where we live.
We pray for all of them;
not only those we know by name
and chat to through the day,
but also less familiar faces
about whom we know so little
and pass by with just a smile.
All in need of your love at this time.
Bless their homes and families,
and let your love and peace
so shine within our communities
that smiles turn to conversations,
and strangers become friends.
We pray this through Jesus Christ,
the Prince of Peace. Amen

Closing Praise: We have a Saviour

A child has been given
The King of our freedom
Sing for the light has come
This is Christmas

Come and adore Him
And bring gifts before Him
Joy to the world
Worship the Son
This is Christmas

*This is Jesus, Emmanuel, here with us
Tell all the world
We have a Saviour
We have a Saviour*

*We are no longer lost
'Cause He has come down for us
We have a Saviour
We have a Saviour*

Sing with the angels
And lift up your voices
Join in the song of hope
This is Christmas

This is Jesus, Emmanuel, here with us
Tell all the world
We have a Saviour
We have a Saviour
We are no longer lost
'Cause He has come down for us
We have a Saviour
We have a Saviour

His love will reign forever
His love will reign...

Benediction

Friends, it's been good to worship with you today. I hope you have been blessed by our time together; perhaps challenged, perhaps comforted. Either way, know that God will go with us. We'll finish the service with the benediction and I have asked our friend Niel from Stornoway to lead the benediction for us.

Now go in peace and may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you this day and for ever more, Amen.