

LANGBANK CHURCH
Sunday 20 December 2020
Service for the Fourth Sunday in Advent



WELCOME

Good morning everyone on this 4th Sunday of Advent.

Grim news from our Leaders yesterday about the rate of spread of the new strain of Coronavirus in the South East. Bad news, too, for anyone planning to unite with family for a few days over Christmas. These are the days we live in.

As we face the Shortest Day tomorrow, we remember the Angel's first words to the shepherds, **"Do not be afraid"!** for we learn again today, through the Christmas Story, that God is always with us, and his Light is never extinguished.

Now.....On the FOURTH Sunday of Advent,
we bring the Light of Christ
into our dark morning

Orry is coming to light the Candle representing JOY

CALL TO WORSHIP

**The solstice skies are grey,
the air's damp haze
penetrates our coats and blurs the sight**

**of we who trudge towards the stable light,
hope's inspiration in these darkling days.
But God is in the gloom - as in the light
- and if we keep the faith,
we, too will see the brightness of the Angel train
and catch their Message
'Do not fear'
for God is here.**

Let us worship God in the words of our first hymn....

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6ji4y9Q-K0>

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name, the Lord, the mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and forever more!

Let us pray

Lord Jesus,

be born once more in me this Christmas!

May my will be as Mary's,
saying 'yes' to your ways;
my mind as Joseph's
open to your unfolding revelation.

May my feet be as the shepherds'
running eagerly to find you;
my hands as the wise men's
offering up all I have.

May my voice be as the angels'
joyfully proclaiming Good News;
my knees as the animals',
quietly bent in adoration.

May my heart be as the manger,
poor, yet containing heaven's greatest treasure;
my life as the stable,
hallowed and expanded by your presence.

Lord Jesus,

*We pray together now in the words
you taught us, saying...*

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 debts,
as we forgive 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*

READING: Luke 2: 1-7

The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NMJuH4-Zil>

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed
the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head
the stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay
the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes
but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes
I love you Lord Jesus! look down from the sky
and stay by my side until morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay
close by me for ever and love me I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care
and fit us for heaven to live with you there.

READING: Luke 2: 8-20

The Shepherds and the Angels

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them,

‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

REFLECTION

My Sermon Slide shows the Joy of my Life, our wee grandson, Winter, now 18 months old. Jim and Joanna and I are besotted and could watch him for hours as he discovers the wonders of the world around him.



More to the point, the photo shows *his* Joy at the Angel on his Christmas Tree. It's the first time he's noticed an Angel and all he can do is point and shriek at its dazzling brightness. What would he be like with the real thing?

The renowned Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, tells how his ten year old son was asked by his Sunday School teacher to write a Christmas Play. He wrote a dialogue between one of the Lambs and a Donkey that were present at the stable that night in Bethlehem. He called it, '*Gosh, some Angels!*'.... *Well!* what else *would* you say if you were ambushed by the Heavenly Host!

This most amazing aspect of the whole Nativity Story is largely ignored after we leave Primary School..... - perhaps because we've lost the common knowledge of who the Angels are and what their Message means.

The Angels in the Bible are part of a much larger notion that heaven was the world of the gods, many gods. They all had their various functions, and, each year they met in a grand Assembly. In the Bible it is referred to as the 'Divine Council', a sort of United Nations in heaven.

Each year they did several things:

First, they decided who would be King of the Gods and preside over the Council. There are many Psalms in the Old Testament which tell about Yahweh, the God of Israel, being chosen King of the Gods for the year ahead... for example, in Ps 96: *“Sing to the Lord a new song – the Lord reigns!”*

Second, the gods determined whether or not it would be a prosperous new year. This is the tradition behind Jesus quoting the Old Testament, when he famously announces in the temple at Nazareth,

*“I am sent ‘To proclaim release to the captives and sight to the blind
..... and to proclaim the acceptable year of Lord.’”*

Lastly, it was widely believed that the gods decided *who* would become King.

After the gods had made their decisions about the human world, they chose some of their number to bring the Message to the world of men. And that’s all the word Angel means – Messenger – the one who brings the Message to tell the world how it is going to be. There is nothing soft or sweet about Angels. They bring a clear, strong, non-negotiable message. They do not have wings. The Message comes in all kinds of ways,

- a Dream,
- a Vision,
- an Inner Voice,
- a Confrontation.....

But it IS a Message from God... and the one who brings it is an Angel.

And that’s what happened in Bethlehem Fields that night. The Shepherds represent every person getting on with their business-as-usual, assuming that tomorrow will be much like yesterday, with its ups and downs, problems and blessings - but mostly just living day to day.

Christmas is affirmation that God’s Message is cutting through the world of everyday. And, as with many Miracles, it begins with a statement of Glory – a bright light, which puts fear into the hearts of the Shepherds, and heralds the presence of God himself. Christmas is the celebration of God’s decision to give the world a new King, who will de-throne all the fake Kings.

Not Caesar in Rome,
not Herod in Jerusalem,

not Pilate as Governor,
nor all the Presidents, or Premiers
or Prime Ministers or Generals.....
none of them will be King because the world has been turned in a new
direction.

The new King will come from Bethlehem, from The City of David. And this means, to anyone who knows, that the Promises of God have been kept and will be kept in future, through this baby. Where there has been fear, he will bring joy. Where there has been suffering, he will bring wholeness. The Incarnation makes no sense unless you allow that it is a fresh decision by God about the shape of the world.

The shape of the world is very much in our public conversation just now. The Pandemic has devastated the lives of many, either directly through illness – or indirectly, through loss of jobs or loss of opportunity. Many cannot wait for the world to turn back.

Yet there are others for whom the world has already turned these last nine months. People, forced off their treadmill have found Joy in new pursuits... in music, in painting, in reading - or in the companionship of neighbours whom they never really knew before. Many more have found Joy in the natural world – in their own gardens, or on countryside walks.

I have a close friend whose husband had died the year before, after a long illness. We were concerned about how she would handle the isolation. But she told me recently that lockdown was just what she needed. She was tired of going out for lunch with well-meaning friends, and having the same conversations about how she was feeling, how she was coping. Instead, she has taken to packing a picnic, a pair of binoculars and a book of wild flowers and setting off with a walking chum and finding Peace and Joy in the glory of God's creation (to put it grandly).

For her, this year has been a time of healing. She has had the space to *let* her life turn in a new direction and she does *not* want to go back. She's not alone in that. Christmas encourages us all, every year, to turn our lives and our world in a *new* direction - let's not waste the chance.

God came to earth as a baby, promising Joy - promising his Kingdom to all who would come as a little child, as Winter is already reminding me!

The next time I saw him point and shriek was when he looked up and saw the Finlaystone Waterfall in spate. Through his eyes I see the world afresh and share his wonder.

Spirit talks to Spirit when God's glory breaks through the clouds of our everyday - and it *always* lifts our heads – *if* we notice!

May the Angels touch YOU this Christmas and bring you all a little bit of heavenly Joy.

Amen, thanks be to God.

Our next carol is....

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

The Virgin Mary had a baby boy
the Virgin Mary had a baby boy
the Virgin Mary had a baby boy
and they say that his name is Jesus.

*He come from the glory
he come from the glorious kingdom
He come from the glory
he come from the glorious kingdom
O yes, believer!
O yes, believer!
He come from the glory
he come from the glorious kingdom.*

The shepherds came when the baby was born
the shepherds came when the baby was born
the shepherds came when the baby was born
and they say that his name is Jesus.

The angels sang when the baby was born
the angels sang when the baby was born
the angels sang when the baby was born
and they say that his name is Jesus.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Let us pray,

When the world was dark
and the village was quiet,
you came.

You crept in beside us.

And no-one knew.
Only the few
who dared to believe
that God might do something different.

Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord?

Will you come into the darkness of today's world:
not the friendly darkness
as when sleep rescues us from tiredness,
but the fearful darkness,
in which people have stopped believing
that war will end
or that food will come
or that a government will change
or that the Church cares?

Will you come into that darkness
and do something different
to save your people from death and despair?

Will you come into the darkness of this village,
not the friendly darkness
as when lovers hold hands,
but the *fearful* silence

when the phone *hasn't* rung
the letter *hasn't* come
the friendly voice *no longer* speaks
the doctor's face says it all?

Will you come into that darkness,
and do something different,
not to distract, but to embrace your people?

And will you come into the dark corners
and the quiet places of our lives?

We ask this not because we are guilt-ridden
or want to be,
but because the fullness our lives long for
depends on us being as open and vulnerable to you
as you were to us,
when you came,
wearing no more than nappies,
and trusting human hands
to hold their maker.

Will you come into our lives,
if we open them to you
and do something different?

[pause]

We take a moment or two of quietness
to hold before you now
any one or any situation
which is causing us concern just now....

[pause]

As we bring our money,
for the building of your Kingdom
here on earth,

Come, Lord Jesus,
into OUR lives...

Give us Peace in our time
and Hope for the future
- Love towards all people
and Joy in our hearts
for your sake. *Amen*

INTIMATIONS

1) Our next Service will be next Sunday, 27th December for a Service of Readings and Carols.... when we will celebrate Jesus' birth again through words and music. **Due to the new restrictions which will come into force on Boxing Day, our congregation will be restricted once more to 20 people. Please contact George Wilkinson if you would like to attend.**

2) Our Christmas Carol Walk is now established in 7 locations posted around the village. Read the Lesson printed on the Poster and listen to a Carol by scanning the code with your phone.

3) Janet sends a reminder that the new Church Envelopes have now arrived and you can contact her if this involves you.

4) Today, we have three hand-made crafts available for a donation to church funds sale: Face Masks; Cheer up Bags; and Jewellery – all are ideal stocking fillers.

5) Members of the Bible Study Group can pick up Party Bags for our Christmas Zoom this Wednesday morning at 11 am.

Now, we move to our last carol for today

Rutter's arrangement of 'Joy to the World'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GP1L-QgXWCg>

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love

BENEDICTION

**The JOY of the angels
the HUMILITY of the shepherds
and the PEACE of the Christ-child
be GOD'S GIFT to you
this Christmas**

And the blessing of God Almighty

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

be with you all

now and evermore,

Amen