

Welcome

Good morning, and welcome to this weeks online service live from Christchurch. My name is Andy Searle, a member at Christchurch and a local preacher in the circuit. This week, we have Lisa Morgan, Rob Bryan and Mike Crowley providing our music, our reader is David Box , and we must not forget John Hamblin on technical support, without which, these services would not be possible.

We are now at the 4th week of our advent services and if you have been following each week, you will know that the theme has been "Hidden Treasures". This week, we will be thinking about Mary and Joseph, leading up to the birth of Jesus, their hidden treasure, as they waited for new life to be born, New life who would for us, represent our advent hope.

To symbolise the advent hope that the Christ child would be the light of the world, we will now light the 4th advent candle.

Those of you who saw last week's service will have heard and seen Louise doing Makaton signing to a Christmas song. Tony Edmonds has now put together a video of the song with six people signing along to it and we are going to share this with everyone now for our opening song.

The angels knew. Christchurch Makaton

<https://youtu.be/u32sDRu2Etc>

Prayer of Praise and confession.

God of Life and Joy, in this time of Advent we joyfully celebrate your certain promise of the new world to come. We rejoice in anticipation of your servant Isaiah's vision that calls for the wasteland to be turned into fruitful and blossoming land. We shout for joy, exalting you with all your heart. For "we shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

O God, giver of joy, bless the church of Christ that we may celebrate the incarnation of your love in the person of Jesus. May the whole world recognise the healing and saving ministry of Christ through us as we reach out to a world filled with dark shadows.

You challenge us this Advent time
This season of preparation
To put aside our pride
And understand our need
For repentance
Forgiveness
And mercy
Less of self
More of you

Preparation for our journey
To the stable and beyond
Purify our hearts
Sanctify our lives
That we might serve you
Faithfully this day and all days. Amen

Readings

Matthew 1:18-25

John 3:1-8 and 16-17

Message. New life is waiting

I am certain that many of you will have a nativity set as part of your Christmas decorations at home. And at the centre of this will be Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in the manger. This (Powerpoint) is a typical depiction of this scene – there are hundreds of examples like this to choose from. Everyone is clean, well dressed, look happy, even the baby.... Do you think that this is a realistic picture of how things were at the time of Jesus' birth? Highly unlikely. I am sure the circumstances were actually much, much harder than portrayed by this scene. In fact, pretty much everything that took place in the preceding 9 months was far more difficult for Mary and Joseph than we can understand from a simple reading of their story. This new baby, this new life they waited for, came into being in miraculous circumstances, Yes. But it was an incredibly challenging experience which required a tremendous amount of faith, and loyalty and determination to see it through to the end.

Often on this 4th Sunday in advent, we focus on Mary and the Annunciation. That she reacted to the angel with such faith at such a young age is remarkable. But it was a burden to take on – as yet, a very young woman, betrothed but also pregnant. The custom of the time was that the betrothal was essentially a private marriage which would then be publicly celebrated 9-12 months later. Matthew's account wraps Mary's experience into just one verse, but places more emphasis than Luke's account on how this would impact Joseph, often the forgotten member of the family. It could have wrecked their relationship – it could appear that she had become pregnant by another man and she tries to hide her unfaithfulness by concocting this story about The Holy Spirit conceiving the child! Could easily be a scene from the 21st century. Actually he showed his faithfulness to the law and his love and care for Mary by considering quietly ending the relationship which as yet was not made public – in essence he could be saving her from future public stoning which was the penalty for adultery.

It was Joseph's first encounter with an angel in a dream (but by no means his last) which explained the truth of the situation but also the remarkable promise associated with their son – this New life, their child they waited for would be the Saviour of the world. So this family carried the possible stigma of Mary's pregnancy with them for the next nine months. Then what follows after the birth was no easier – a family forced into exile as refugees, again a story we could take and drop into the 21st century. And for Jesus, at no point in his life could we say that things were easy and straightforward - persecution would eventually follow which ultimately led to his cruel and horrific death. Yet throughout this story, this promise of salvation and new life was always waiting to be realised.

An encounter 30 odd years later in Jesus life after his birth in Bethlehem with the Pharisee Nicodemus gives us glimpses of the how and the what associated with this promise of New Life and salvation. The parallel between physical birth and then being born again into a new spiritual life is drawn. And we are told this new life, is Kingdom life, eternal life. Elsewhere, Jesus said 'I have come to give you life, life in all its fullness'. Life beyond our wildest imagination! And in another parallel, just as circumstances associated with his birth were surrounded by hardship and suffering, so New Life was born out of the worst kind of suffering, even his own death. Little did Mary and Joseph realise how this Baby would really change the world, would really change lives and still be changing lives 2000 years later – maybe knowing that, they would have been smiling at his birth.

The events so far of 2020 have demonstrated a stark reality, that we are living through difficult and challenging times. More than ever the promise of a New Life waiting is needed as we see so much hurt and suffering, physically, mentally, economically all around us. I as write this, the news of tier 3 for Hertfordshire is being rolled out and the devastating impact on hospitality and sport is being highlighted. Yet I also heard a news item about 6 word stories, a form a literature where a message is communicated in just six words - and various celebrities shared their contemporary 6 word stories and there was a common theme cutting across these, about hope for the future that things will improve. Advent is a time of expectation and hope. I was speaking last Sunday morning about light, one of the symbols we focus on at Christmas. I used the phrase, 'light at the end of the tunnel' as an expression of hope. Maybe that is my 6 word story. Since then, I have heard at least two politicians and scientists use this same phrase to describe where we are in the pandemic. We are still in the tunnel, but we do have a way out, a hope, through the vaccination programme and it is somewhat poignant that this has come during the season of advent. New life in Jesus is waiting for us, life characterised by the fullness of God is waiting. The events of the first Christmas were just the beginning of the story of the incarnation, as the child in the manger, became the man who died for all on the cross, but the tomb could not hold him, and as he is risen in New life, we are risen with him to share in his eternal life.

Song Darkness like a shroud (STF 170)

Darkness Like A Shroud Covers The Earth;
Evil Like A Cloud Covers The People.
But The Lord Will Rise Upon You,
And His Glory Will Appear On You-
Nations Will Come To Your Light.

Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
The Glory Of The Lord Has Risen On You!
Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
Jesus The Light Of The World Has Come.

Children Of The Light, Be Clean And Pure.
Rise, You Sleepers, Christ Will Shine On You.
Take The Spirit's Flashing Two-Edged Sword

And With Faith Declare God's Mighty Word;
Stand Up And In His Strength Be Strong.

Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
The Glory Of The Lord Has Risen On You!
Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
Jesus The Light Of The World Has Come.

Here Among Us Now, Christ The Light
Kindles Brighter Flames In Our Trembling Hearts.
Living Word, Our Lamb, Come Guide Our Feet
As We Walk As One In Light And Peace,
Till Justice And Truth Shine Like The Sun.

Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
The Glory Of The Lord Has Risen On You!
Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
Jesus The Light Of The World Has Come.

Like A City Bright So Let Us Blaze;
Lights In Every Street Turning Night To Day.
And The Darkness Shall Not Overcome
Till The Fulness Of Christ's Kingdom Comes,
Dawning To God's Eternal Day.

Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
The Glory Of The Lord Has Risen On You!
Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
Jesus The Light Of The World Has Come.

Prayers

Father, we come before you in prayer, calling on your Holy Spirit to fill us. Your son Jesus came to bring us new life, and through the example of his life and ministry, he has given us the perfect example to follow. He was free from prejudice, he reached out to those who were unloved by the rest of society, he had no barriers. So help us to follow his example today – to seek out those who are forgotten by others, those whose lives have been turned upside down by the effects of the pandemic. As you have loved us, so we love others. **Breathe on me breath of God.**

Breathe on me, breath of God:
fill me with life anew,
that I may love as you have loved
and do as you would do.

We pray this morning for the leaders of our nation, our government, and their counterparts throughout the world. Sharing responsibility for the management of the pandemic, and the impact on global and local economies. May they collectively work to do your will though these difficult times. Help us to be supportive in these times in following the direction of our leaders. Hard decisions have to be taken and it is tempting not to adhere, so help us to stay focused on what we have to do to get through and endure. **Breathe on me breath of God.**

Breathe on me, breath of God,
until my heart is pure,
until my will is one with yours
to do and to endure.

Father, in these times when we are not able to meet together regularly in worship as your fellowship here, may this not be an excuse for us to forget our calling to share the good news of Jesus. Inspired by your spirit, may we find new ways to communicate this message, that more than ever at this Christmas time, this world needs to know our saviour, Christ the light of the world. May this be our passion, consuming our energies to point the way to the one who comes. **Breathe on me breath of God.**

Breathe on me, breath of God;
fulfil my heart's desire,
until this earthly part of me
glows with your heavenly fire.

Father, we thank you for the hope, the promise of New and Eternal life made possible through the birth, the life and death, and the glorious resurrection of Christ. Even as we face suffering now, help us to persevere, so we become stronger and grow in character and strive to move forward to gain our hope. And may we travel not as individuals along this road, but surrounded by our brothers and sisters in faith, as a community of faith, stronger together, looking out for those who are struggling, lifting them up to restore their hope. We do this, not in our own strength but overflowing with your power. **Breathe on me breath of God.**

Breathe on me, breath of God;
so shall I never die,
but live with you the perfect life
of your eternity.

Amen

Let us now wherever we are, say the Lord's Prayer together sung whatever version we prefer.

Lord's Prayer

In a normal year, we would be gathering this evening for our annual candlelit Carol service. Although communal singing is not possible under current

restrictions, we wanted to still allow people to experience the Christmas story through familiar carols and readings. So this evening there will be another live streamed service at 6pm where a small group of socially distanced singers and readers will lead a Carol service so we don't as a congregation miss out in this essential part of our Christmas experience at Christchurch. I hope as many of you as possible can join on YouTube with a mince pie or two at 6pm.

Blessing

God of Love, your son Jesus, is your greatest gift to us. He is a sign of your love. Help us to walk in that love during the weeks of advent. As we wait and prepare for his coming. We pray in the name of our Saviour Jesus. Amen.

Song Great is the darkness (STF 405)

Great is the darkness
That covers the earth
Oppression, injustice and pain
Nations are slipping
In hopeless despair
Though many have come in Your name
Watching while sanity dies
Touched by the madness and lies

Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus
Pour out Your spirit we pray
Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus
Pour out Your spirit on us today

May now Your church rise
With power and love
This glorious gospel proclaim
In every nation
Salvation will come
To those who believe in Your name
Help us bring light to this world
That we might speed Your return

Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus
Pour out Your spirit we pray
Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus
Pour out Your spirit on us today

Great celebrations
On that final day
When out of the heavens You come
Darkness will vanish

All sorrow will end
And rulers will bow at Your throne
Our great commission complete
Then face to face we shall meet

Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus
Pour out Your spirit we pray
Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus
Pour out Your spirit on us today