

Welcome

Good morning, and welcome to this week's online service live from Christchurch. My name is Peter Rogers and I am local preacher in the North Herts Circuit. This week, we have Mike, Lisa and Catriona providing our music, our reader is Diane, and we must not forget Tony on technical support, without which, these services would not be possible.

Call to worship

God is with us! Hallelujah!

Isaiah 9:2 (New International Version)

²The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

Two verses from today's Bible reading which comes from the first chapter of John's Gospel:

John 1:9 & 14 (New International Version)

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

¹⁴The 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.

Hymn (StF) 101

We sing our first hymn, written by John Bell, *Before the world began, one Word was there*;

Before the world began,
one Word was there;
grounded in God he was,
rooted in care;
by him all things were made,
in him was love displayed,
through him God spoke, and said,
'I am for you.'

Life found in him its source,
death found its end;

light found in him its course,
darkness its friend.
For neither death nor doubt
nor darkness can put out
the glow of God, the shout,
'I am for you.'

The Word was in the world
which from him came;
unrecognised he was,
unknown by name;
one with all humankind,
with the unloved aligned,
convincing sight and mind,
'I am for you.'

All who received the Word
by God were blessed;
sisters and brothers they
of earth's fond guest.
So did the Word of grace
proclaim in time and space
and with a human face,
'I am for you.'

John L. Bell (b. 1949)
and Graham Maule (b. 1958)

Prayers & Lord's Prayer

Lord, we gather together, a few in church, but most in our homes, to worship you, our loving God, creator of universe and atom, far flung stars and sheep, planets and pretty plants that adorn our gardens and countryside. We praise you, our awesome God, always there for us, someone who always keeps his promises, someone who sent his son, Jesus, born as a baby just as we were, as we have just celebrated, to teach us and show us the right way to live, and who gave up his life to pay the price for our sins.

We are still far from the finished article and despite what you have done for us, we continue to let you down and fail to follow your teachings. Lord, we ask yet again that you will forgive us.

If we confess our sins,
God is faithful and just
and will forgive our sins,
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

As we continue in prayer, we thank you that you that you were willing to do that for us, and we thank you for all that you have provided for us to enable us to live our daily lives; food to eat; stuff to enable us to build homes make clothes from so that we can stay dry and warm; people skilled in science, engineering and

medicine who ease our lives and help us to stay well and communicate with our friends and family however far away they may be.

We thank you for those who have the skills that have developed the vaccines that we hope will protect us from the Covid-19 virus. At this difficult time we pray that you will give those who work in our health and care services the endurance, strength, and courage to continue to carry out exhausting duties.

Lord, we stand on the threshold of a new year promising fulfilment of hopes and plans and dreams. A year ago we may have stood in the same place and yet many of the hopes and plans and dreams we had then were soon dissipated and shattered. Help us to overcome those disappointments and be content with what we have. We ask particularly that you will be with those mourning the loss of loved ones during the past year, and that they may know your presence with them and your comforting arms surrounding them. We thank you that you are a constant in our lives, never changing, always there for us.

We pray and name those known to us whose health is not good right now.

We ask Lord that where possible those named will be restored to health and strength. Where that is not possible we pray that those concerned will receive the assistance and care they need, and for those facing the end of their earthly lives we pray that they may be at peace and free from pain.

We pray that you will be with governments around the world and give them wisdom and guidance as they grapple with the pandemic and its consequences for health services, the economy and people's livelihoods and seek the ways of peace and co-operation.

We ask these prayers in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. **Amen.**

Hymn (StF) 706

Our next hymn is 'Longing for light we wait in darkness.'

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to You.
Make us Your own, Your holy people,
Light for the world to see.

*Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in Your church gathered today.*

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us Your living voice.

Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us Your bread, broken for others,
Shared until all are fed.

Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us Your building, sheltering others,
Walls made of living stone.

Many the gifts, many the people,
Many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
Making Your kingdom come.

Bernadette Farrell
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Bible Reading

We will now hear our Bible reading.

John 1:1-18 (New International Version)

The Word became flesh

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ (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.”’) ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Reflection

The first chapter of John, to me, is complex. We find part of the story of John the Baptist entwined with the introduction of Jesus. In contrast to the synoptic gospels, where Luke, has a long narrative foretelling and describing the births of both John and Jesus, along with historical facts fixing it in the annals of time; where Matthew prefaces his account with Jesus’ Jewish genealogy, yet including the gentile Magi; and the impetuous Mark who dives straight in with the good news; John goes right back to the beginning of time with a brief account of creation itself. **“In the beginning was the Word, ... He was with God in the beginning.”** I wondered if the lectionary people chose this reading for the first week of a new year because it talks of the beginning.

Back in the 60’s there was a satirical review programme on television called “That was the week that was” or “TW3” for short. For many 2020 was “That was the year that was”. We all hope that 2021 will be better than 2020. But for some it won’t be. However, at the beginning of the year, the beginning of John’s gospel announces unrivalled hope. In the gloomy days towards the end of last year I heard or saw a number of comments expressing despondency. There was that glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel, an uplift in spirits when the first vaccine was approved, only for that to be hit on the head by the rapid spread of the more contagious mutation curtailing many Christmas family celebrations.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ... The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

We have just marked the festival of the light coming into the world. I believe the light has remained in the world ever since. It’s just that sometimes we live in the shadows. However dark things seem, John the Gospel writer declares that the darkness does not overcome that light. It’s time for us to live in that light and reflect it to the world around us. As we move forward in 2021 let us be positive and put hope and trust in that light.

By and large we don’t know what is around the corner and for some 2021 will be worse than 2020 and I know someone whose prospects of seeing much of 2021 are exceedingly slim. In terms of life’s ups, and downs, being people of the light doesn’t guarantee us immunity from life’s downs in particular, but it is where we can gain strength, courage and comfort. May that be our experience.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him.

That is still true today. Indeed many definitely refuse to recognize him. On the other hand, we believe he lives in us through the Holy Spirit, that he is omnipresent throughout the world. One of the challenges we face is not only to persuade those who refuse to recognize him to do the opposite, but to tell of his existence to those who have never heard of him. There are secular states that allow faith and belief to be the choice of the individual citizen; but in contrast there are states that deliberately oppress and persecute those who profess they follow Jesus because they fear that if their citizens claim to answer to a higher authority they will lose control. Our faith says that if God is in control, life will be much better.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. ... For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

One of the phenomena of recent years is discerning the truth from all the “information” that comes our way and I put information in inverted commas because some of that information is true and some is false. Where

we choose to get that information from and what we choose to accept or reject is up to us. Whether something is true or not we can always claim it is “fake news” if we don’t like it. Many, I’m sure would claim the Christmas story to be fake news. Although Jesus has faced many human detractors through the centuries, the story has faithfully been passed on from generation to generation, albeit sometimes with more evangelistic fervour than others. The growth of our denominations in the 18th and 19th centuries and their decline in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century bear witness to this.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.

At the beginning of a new year, let us remember that, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,” “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.” Let us proclaim that and like John the Baptist be witnesses that testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Amen.

Song

As a response listen to *Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky*, written by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Many years ago I sang a choral version of this at the end of an annual carol concert. This version is sung by Paul Field. I thought it apt to our current situation in several ways.

Paul Field

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmyi_WLqiGw

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Hymn (StF) 405

We sing our final hymn, *Great is the darkness that covers the earth.*

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.

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.

Noel Richards & Gerald Coates
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Blessing

Numbers 6:24-26 (New King James Version)

²⁴ “The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ The LORD make His face shine upon you,

And be gracious to you;

²⁶ The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,

And give you peace.”

Amen.

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