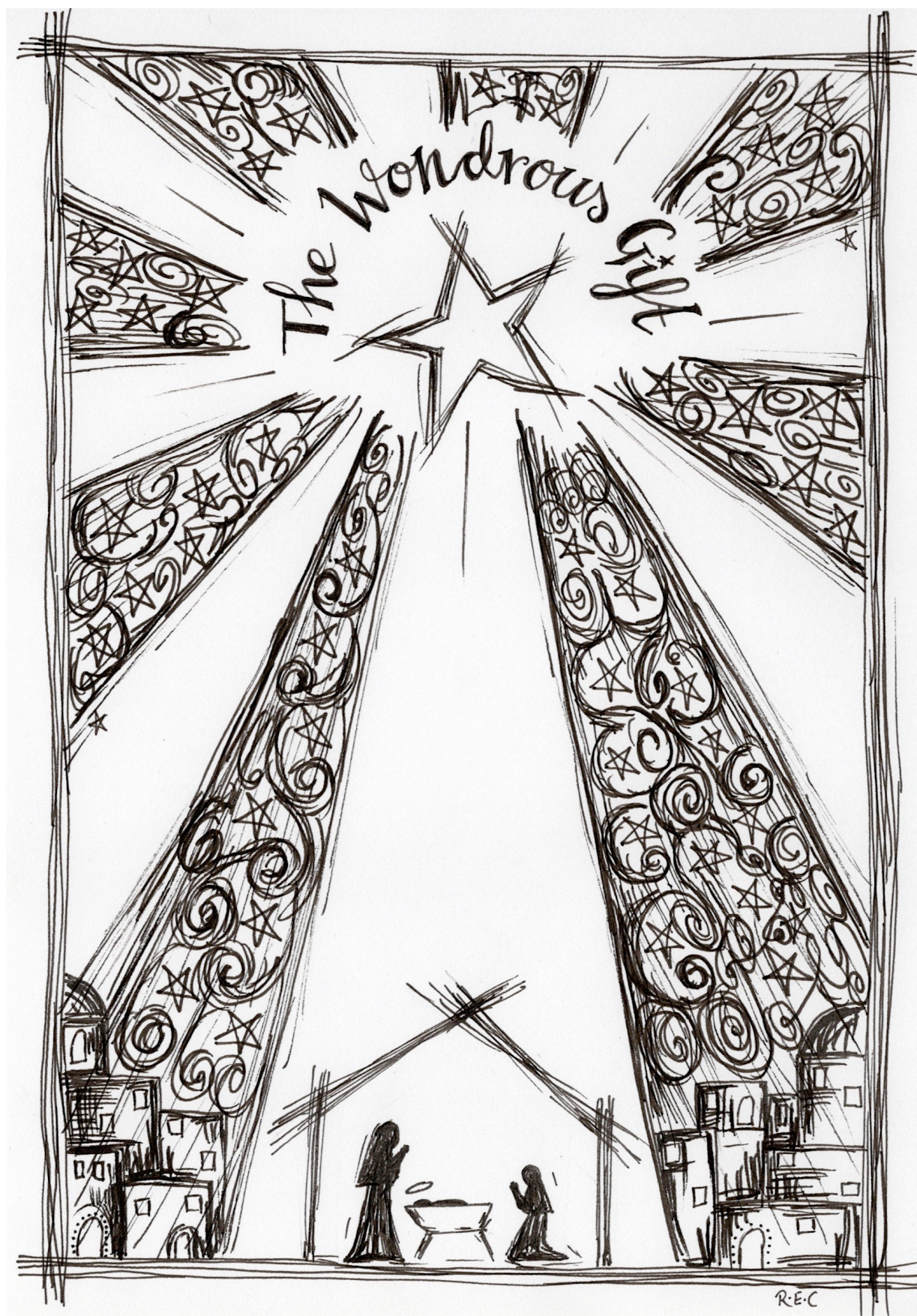


A Resource for Christmas



THE CHURCH UNION



The Society

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Introduction

One of my favourite Christmas carols is ‘O little town of Bethlehem’. It may not be the one with the best tune, but I find the words compelling. It was written by Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) who for the final two years of his life was Bishop of Massachusetts, having served as Rector of Holy Trinity, Boston, USA for some twenty years from 1869.

In the opening verse of the carol Phillips Brooks invites us to imagine Bethlehem on the night of Christ’s birth, dark and still, yet holding within it the light of God’s eternal presence. He says of Bethlehem:

“The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee to-night.”

The gospel accounts of Christ’s nativity hold together both hope and fear. In our preparation for Christmas we’ve been contemplating the character of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Her fear over the task that she is called to share in is demonstrated in her question, “how will this be?” (Luke 1.34) But that fear is met by the hope of God’s promises being fulfilled, and the angel declares “the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.” (Luke 1.36)

As the nativity accounts unfold that theme of fear and hope runs through them. There’s the fear of the hurried journey to Bethlehem by Mary and Joseph, set against the background of the intimidating power of the Roman Empire and the demands of the census; the quest of accommodation (imagined so vividly in a million school Nativity plays); the Holy Family coping with a new-born without the usual resources of an extended family; the shepherds scared out of their wits by the vision of angels; the Magi, eccentrics following a star and meeting the paranoid brutality of Herod; the flight to Egypt for the Holy Family in fear of their lives.

Yet the fear is met again and again by hope: the hope of God working out his promises through human history; the hope of God’s solidarity with the poor and the stranger; the hope that declares “fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy” (Luke 2.10); the hope that in this vulnerable baby the Love that moves the universe has taken on human flesh; the hope that here is a Light that darkness will never conquer.

Perhaps this Christmas finds you struggling with those competing emotions in your heart and mind. The hopes and fears of the past few months are a heavy burden to carry, but Christmas shows us where to take them. In that “little town of Bethlehem” we see the God who draws alongside in Jesus to take our fears, who keeps his promises, and who makes us sharers of his life for ever.

As Phillips Brooks' carol goes on it tells us what we need to do in order to feel the fears calmed and the hopes renewed.

“How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heaven.”

Rather than coming in power God came silently in Jesus so that we could open our hearts to receive him as a wondrous gift. These days of Christmas and into Epiphany invite us to do just that, and in the opening of our hearts through worship, prayer, reflection to accept with gratitude his gift of life.

How to use this booklet

During the season of Advent we've been preparing for Christmas by reflecting on the themes suggested by the Advent Wreath with online videos and the booklet 'O Radiant Dawn'. As we continue our journey this booklet carries us through the days between Christmas and the great festival of Epiphany, and then looks at some of the themes of Epiphany.

To accompany this booklet there is a further online video, and this will be available from Christmas Eve via The Society YouTube Channel or on The Church Union and The Society Facebook pages (details of these are on the back cover of this booklet). The video begins with a devotional reflection led by the Bishop of Lewes, the Rt Revd Will Hazlewood as he lights the final candle on the Advent Wreath, there is seasonal choral music from the choir of St Stephen's, Gloucester Road in London and then a talk from a priest of The Society. You can use this booklet without referring to the online video, but it serves as an introduction to what we will be exploring together in these days.

Friday 25 December

Christmas Day

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. *Luke 2.6,7*

The account of the birth of Jesus given by St Luke's Gospel is pretty brief, but those two verses are rich in meaning. When he tells us that 'the time came' for Mary to give birth he doesn't just mean that the pregnancy has reached full term. It's that God's time is right, the preparations and promises made so long ago, some of which we have been following together over the past few days, had reached the point when they can come to their fruition. "When the fullness of time had come," writes St Paul to the Galatians, "God sent his Son, born of a woman..." (4.4)

Luke tells us that the new born is laid in a manger, a feeding trough, and we might see here a sign that Jesus has come as true food, the living bread, who will give us the nourishment of body and soul that we need to truly thrive. He tells us too that Jesus is wrapped in swaddling cloths, and some writers have seen this as pointing us towards the end of the story Luke narrates, and the bandages that will wrap the body after the crucifixion. We are already seeing the good news of our redemption is emerging: the eternal God is sharing our life, and our world is changed for ever. Try and find a moment today – perhaps before the Nativity Scene in your home – to let that truth touch you.

God our Father,
whose Word has come among us
in the Holy Child of Bethlehem:
may the light of faith illumine our hearts
and shine in our words and deeds;
through him who is Christ the Lord. Amen.



Saturday 26 December

St Stephen, the first martyr

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. *Luke 2.19,20*

Mary's heart is a treasury, and she lets the events of the birth of Jesus slowly sink in, the better to grasp their significance. Again, we meet her here as the faithful disciple, who shows us how to ponder the things of God in our hearts. The good news of Christmas is not something to be rushed, or understood quickly, or talked about superficially. It needs to be chewed over and pondered deep in our hearts.

But there is an essential dynamic in the Christian life, for we spend time in reflective contemplation of a mystery, and we are also sent as bearers of Good News. Touched by the witness of Mary and Joseph and the child they hold out for them to see, the shepherds have become evangelists. They've recognised that the word given to them about this baby is true. They leave as witnesses to the gospel of peace that they have received, and make known what they have been told about the mission that Jesus will have. Christmas changes us too, and encountering the babe of Bethlehem sends us away as witnesses – even as we recognise in our celebration today of St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, that this witness is often a costly one. What do you want to glorify and praise God for today?

Lord Jesus Christ,
your birth at Bethlehem draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth:
accept our heartfelt praise as we worship you, our Saviour and our eternal God. Amen.



Sunday 27 December

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favour of God was upon him. *Luke 2.39,40*

Family life is sometimes complicated and often not straightforward. Over the Christmas period we spend more time together, and as well as joy and laughter, pleasure and delight there are negotiations to be made – who has control of the television remote control, and just how long are those relatives going to stay for! Today's celebration of the Holy Family is the reminder that in Jesus, Mary and Joseph God is given a home and a family. Just as all babies respond to the nurture, love and care that they receive so does this baby who is eternally God. As a child he is formed and develops through the influences that Mary and Joseph offer him – he needs them and the security they provide in order to grow.

The Holy Family create a new family too, one in which we all belong. Jesus comes so that we can find our true home in God, and discover a deep solidarity as brothers and sisters. There's a lovely Christmas poem by G. K. Chesterton that ends by describing the manger in Bethlehem as "the place where God was homeless and all men are at home." How do you make others feel 'at home' in God's new family?

Heavenly Father,
whose blessed Son shared at Nazareth the life of an earthly home:
help your Church to live as one family,
united in love and obedience,
and bring us all at last to our home in heaven;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Monday 28 December

The Holy Innocents

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." *Matthew 2.17,18*

All too often the Christmas story is presented in such a way that it appears like a flight of fantasy, light years away from the challenges and injustices of the world. We commemorate the Holy Innocents today, those infants killed by Herod out of neurotic pursuit of power. Whether we like it or not Christmas is accompanied by tears, and to spend time reflecting on the coming of God in the manger of Bethlehem also requires us to be attentive to the tears and pain of those around us, especially where that pain involves children. Speaking just after the Aberfan disaster in 1966 the then Archbishop of Wales, drawing on his own experience of the loss of a child said, "I have nothing to say that will make sense of this horror today. All I know is that the words in my Bible about God's promise to be alongside us have never lost their meaning for me. And now we have to work in God's name for the future."

The Incarnate Word becomes part of a world where suffering and cruelty exist, and God is someone who loves the world so much that he is willing to endure suffering and death alongside of humanity. God is not so much a set of easy answers as a presence that sustains, even in the face of unanswerable questions. How can you be a sign of that presence to someone today?

Heavenly Father,
whose children suffered at the hands of Herod, though they had done no wrong:
by the suffering of your Son and by the innocence of our lives
frustrate all evil designs and establish your reign of justice and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Tuesday 29 December

St Thomas Becket, Bishop and Martyr

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. *1 John 2.8-10*

Amongst the many events that Covid-19 has put on hold are the celebrations to mark the 850th anniversary of the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral on this day in 1170, and the 800th anniversary of the translation of his relics to a new shrine on 7th July 1220. His story is a fascinating and complex one: Initially a close friend of King Henry

II, the two men became engaged in a bitter dispute that culminated in Becket's shocking murder by knights with close ties to the king.

The first reading at Mass today speaks of our living in the light of God's presence, and of the love we bear to others being the witness to our allegiance to that light. Hate has no place in the relationships of the children of light, and the hate that grew in the heart of Henry II towards a friend who refused to simply buttress his power but who instead witnessed to the priority of God in all things, led to murder. The relationship between the two men offers us a challenge: do we expect, as Henry II did of St Thomas, that our friends will simply affirm our opinions whatever they are? Or are we willing to let them call us out of our self-absorption? The witness of friends like St Thomas Becket prompts us to examine whose law we live by, and whose love impels us to die to self. Who are those friends for you?

Lord God,
who gave grace to your servant Thomas Becket
to put aside all earthly fear and be faithful even to death:
grant that we, disregarding worldly esteem,
may fight all wrong, uphold your rule, and serve you to our life's end;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Wednesday 30 December

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, children, because you know the Father. *1 John 2.13*

“What child is this,” asks the carol by William Chatterton Dix (1837 – 1898), “who, laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping?” It’s a good question to have in our minds whenever we look at the crib scene set up in our homes or displayed in our churches. What child is this? Over the past couple of days we’ve been reading from the First Letter St John at Mass, as it points us to the answer: the birth of Jesus links us back to the very beginning, connecting us with our creator. In Jesus the eternal God reaches into the depths of himself and offers himself to us, so that when we are looking at the Christ child in Bethlehem we are looking into the heart of God himself. He is showing himself to us, and as we watch this child grow we will hear God speaking; we will see God healing; we will discover his great love for us. When we look at him we see God –we “know him who is from the beginning.”

“What child is this?” The carol goes on “Come, have no fear, God’s son is here.” What we’re celebrating is not the birth of a particularly sweet and harmless baby; or even the welcome possibility of an extra drink in the middle of winter. What we’re celebrating is the discovery, the revelation, that when we see Jesus we see the God who is the reality out of which everything else comes but who knows and loves us eternally. What are the ways in which you have come to “know” God?

God our Father,
whose Word has come among us
in the Holy Child of Bethlehem:
may the light of faith illumine our hearts
and shine in our words and deeds;
through him who is Christ the Lord. Amen.



Thursday 31 December

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. *John 1.4,5*

New Year’s Eve, and how ever we are keeping it I daresay that we won’t be looking back on the year that is drawing to a close with unbridled happiness. Even the most stoic of us recognise the disappointments that the last year has held for many, from grief through the unexpected bereavements Covid-19 has delivered to many, to cancelled plans and hastily rearranged events. No life exists entirely in success and satisfaction, and disappointment and regret are woven through our days. Faith is not a relentless “looking on the bright side of life”, but it does call us to be aware that there is another reality deeper than the one we have been experiencing. There is a light shining in the darkness and the God who seeks us all our days offers us a Life that transcends the confusion of the present.

Perhaps an important part of our prayer and reflection today will be being honest with God about our disappointments this year, so that he brings us healing and hope. It might not have been the year we expected, but it is set in the perspective of an eternal Kingdom, and, as Moses tells the children of Israel “The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” (Exodus 33.27)

Eternal Lord God,
we give you thanks for bringing us through the changes of time
to the beginning of another year.
Forgive us the wrong we have done in the year that is past,
and help us to spend the rest of our days
to your honour and glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Friday 1 January

Mary, Mother of God

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given
by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. *Luke 2.21*

Today is often a day for making resolutions and promises. They might be noble and high-minded, like a commitment to spend more time on family and friends; or they might be more trivial, like losing the weight we're putting on at Christmas by joining a gym! On this day of promise making the Blessed Virgin Mary is a good companion for us. She trusts God's promises and fulfils his will, seeing his plans through by ensuring that what the angel told her to do is carried out. In the gospel at Mass today we hear how she makes sure Jesus is called by the name God wanted, and of her commitment to him in care, emotion and thought.

Seeking the companionship of Mary at the start of the secular New Year is an invitation to let this truly be 'a Year of Grace' in which we deepen our own "yes" to God. Seeking her friendship with us in prayer is a sure way to grow in trust and discipleship. By her free consent Mary made the coming of God in human time and space possible. Today we ask for the help of her prayers as we strive to make God visible by our own words and deeds in the year ahead.

We fly to thy protection, O holy Mother of God;
despise not our petitions in our necessities,
but deliver us always from all dangers,
O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen.



Saturday 2 January

Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, Bishops and Doctors of the Church

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

John 1.26,27

In the early years of the Church believers wondered over the identity of Jesus, and how he could be truly divine. Was it that the ‘God bit’ somehow got added on to him at a later stage, rather than from the moment of his conception in Mary’s womb? The two fourth century saints that we are celebrating today were friends who were bound together by their desire to witness to the startling truth that Christmas holds out to us: that God became a foetus in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and that the Second Person of the Trinity was born in time.

“God of God, Light of light, Lo! He abhors not the Virgin’s womb, very God, begotten not created” the carol ‘O come, and ye faithful’ puts it, in words from the same time Basil and Gregory were teaching. Jesus is God from God –God’s own life, God’s own self being shared in human time. A life that is being shared like the light of a candle being used to light another candle –spreading flame without making that first light any less. Christmas, these saints tell us, is about God sharing himself, holding nothing back, giving the fullness of his life. How does Christmas define who God is for you?

To you, O Christ, Word of the Father,
we offer our lowly prayers and humble thanks;
for love of our human race
you most wonderfully chose to be born of Mary,
and to take our nature as nevermore to lay it by;
so that we might be born again by your Spirit
and restored in the image of God;
to whom, one blessed Trinity,
be given all honour, might, majesty and power,
now and for ever. Amen.



Sunday 3 January

Second Sunday after the Nativity

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. *John 1.16-18*

A question much beloved of teenagers when you are trying to reason with them is “so what?” “Why should I be bothered about this? What difference does this make to me?” Leaving aside the attitude that might go with it, it's actually a really good question, and a good question to have in our minds when we read the gospels. In his opening chapter St John is giving an answer to the “so what?” of the birth of Jesus. In these verses we see two differences that Christmas makes to our lives.

The first is about what Jesus makes us, and St John tells us that we are now recipients of God's grace. What is given to Jesus by the Father is given to be shared with us, and there is an overflow of divine love, beauty and truth which is poured into us through our relationship with Jesus. The second is where Jesus takes us. St John describes him as the Son of God who is next to the Father's heart. Jesus takes human nature, with all the vulnerability that means, in order to carry it home to the heart of the Father. Our human lives are revealed as being made to receive the embrace of the Father. Do you believe yourself to be loved and cherished by the Father? Where do you best experience that?

All praise to you,
almighty God and heavenly king,
who sent your Son into the world
to take our nature upon him
and to be born of a pure virgin:
grant that, as we are born again in him,
so he may continually dwell in us
and reign on earth as he reigns in heaven,
now and for ever. Amen.



Monday 4 January

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

Matthew 2.1,2

Visitors to my house over the Christmas period are often surprised to come across the figures of the wise men from my crib scene as they make their journey from room to room. They journey through the bedrooms, bathroom, airing cupboard and down the stairs, only arriving at scene in time for the feast of the Epiphany. The journey they make is an important one, it takes time and doubtless involves one or two wrong turns. No wonder that it has proved so inspirational in the imaginations of writers and poets, and there’s an Epiphany poem by T S Eliot, itself drawing on a sermon by Lancelot Andrews, where he beautifully evokes the difficult journey of the Magi, with “the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory, Lying down in the melting snow.”

As we prepare for Epiphany and reflect on the journey of the Magi, perhaps this is a good time to reflect back on the pilgrimage of faith that we are making. At times our progress feels exhilarating and thrilling, at other times slow and filled with wrong turns, impeded by doubts and anxiety. As we look at the baby lying in the straw we see the loving activity of God, and we can recognise that the whole of our lives, even those things that we feel ashamed of, have been there as part of a journey to receive the gift of life he brings. Do you believe the most fruitful period of your life is in your past, present or future? What was it (or what do you hope it will be)?

Creator of the heavens,
who led the Magi by a star
to worship the Christ-child:
guide and sustain us,
that we may find our journey’s end
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Tuesday 5 January

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

Matthew 2.9,10

What was the star that led the Magi to Bethlehem? For centuries people have puzzled over the natural phenomena that the Magi interpret as an announcement of the birth of a king. Some have suggested an alignment of planets, others that this was some sort of comet or supernova. For the ancient Christian writers though it wasn't so much what kind of star this was that mattered, as what it represents. Here they saw the natural world making its own witness to Jesus, and the cosmos playing its own role in God's plan of salvation. "The heavens are telling the glory of God" the psalmist says, and in the star at Epiphany our forebears in the faith saw the very skies contemplating their creator and Lord of the whole universe.

In the fourteenth century Dante described God as the "the Love which moves the sun and the other stars" (*Paradiso*, xxxiii, 145), and the great Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins speaks of "lovely-asunder Starlight, wafting him out of it" in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. God is the origin of all things, and the Bethlehem star is not merely a picturesque addition to the accounts of Christ's birth, but a reminder that creation itself is a witness him and a sign of the restoration of the harmony in all of creation that this royal birth begins. Perhaps you could spend some time today taking a walk or looking at the night sky and delighting in the diversity of creation and giving thanks for it. How does it declare the glory of God to you?

Lord, by the song of the angels
you disclosed your birth to your own people,
and by the leading of a star
you revealed your glory to strangers.
Teach us to know you now,
and to make you known to all. Amen.



Wednesday 6 January

The Epiphany of the Lord

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. *Matthew 2.11*

The expression 'turkeys under the tree' refers to that well known seasonal phenomena, the unwanted Christmas present. It's been calculated that in the days after Christmas 1.2 billion pounds worth of these 'turkeys' are sold on Ebay or exchanged in shops. What makes a good Christmas present is thinking about what the recipient actually wants. So how do the gifts the Wise Men bring measure up? What use might gold, frankincense or myrrh have been to the Holy Family?

The point is that the gifts they bring are not so much about what the child might have wanted, but about who he was. So the gold was the recognition of his kingship, the frankincense of his priesthood and the myrrh of the death that he would die. The real gift at the heart of today's celebration is not the gold, frankincense and myrrh of the Wise Men, but the child Jesus; they gave him gifts in honour of the gift that he was to them, and is to us. We come to offer our gifts of worship, love and service at the manger, but we receive immeasurably more than we give to this priestly king who gives his life for us. His kingship draws us into a kingdom of life and holiness which will never end. His priesthood offers the sacrifice of salvation whereby we have hope. His suffering is the sign of God come down to the lowest point of our need. What gifts are you bringing to the manger today? What gifts are you asking to receive from him?

Lord God,
the bright splendour whom the nations seek:
may we who with the wise men have been drawn by your light
discern the glory of your presence in your Son,
the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



The Baptism of the Lord

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven,
“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased. *Mark 1.9-11*

One of the deep needs of humans that has come to the fore over the past few months is the need for solidarity. Solidarity means being alongside someone in bonds of love, respect and trust. When the Church is at its best solidarity is a hallmark of our common life. As we keep the feast of the Baptism of the Lord one of the great themes that it carries for us is solidarity. Jesus steps into the water of the River Jordan to show solidarity with the whole people of Israel in their yearning for salvation. He shows solidarity with all humanity by subjecting himself to the sign of cleansing from sin. He shows solidarity with creation by allowing his naked body to be clothed with water and air. He shows solidarity with the mission of St John the Baptist by receiving baptism from him rather than vice versa. Finally we see his solidarity with the Father who announces the beloved Son in the power of the Spirit.

At Jordan the mission of Jesus is disclosed: it is one of solidarity, establishing the bonds of solidarity between God and us, bonds so strong they can never be broken. It's the sign of Jesus' full immersion in the world that he has come to bring home to the Father. Each one of us receives a share in that solidarity through our own baptism, and today is a good moment to reflect on the day we ourselves were immersed into that relationship. Do you know when and where you were baptised? Do you celebrate the anniversary of your baptism each year?

Lord of all time and eternity,
you opened the heavens and revealed yourself as Father
in the baptism of Jesus your beloved Son:
by the power of your Spirit
complete the heavenly work of our rebirth
through the waters of the new creation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



The call to transformation

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. *John 2.10,11*

“Three wonders mark this day we celebrate”, the ancient antiphon for the Magnificat at Evening Prayer on the Epiphany sings, “today the star led the Magi to the manger; today water was changed into wine at the marriage feast; today Christ desired to be baptised by John in the river Jordan to bring us salvation, alleluia.” So from early times the Church has linked the first of Jesus’ miracles that St John’s Gospel records with the season of Epiphany. The reason why are the words that St John carefully uses to describe the miracle: it is a ‘sign’ and a ‘manifestation’ of the glory of Jesus.

It is, primarily, a sign of the transformation that Jesus has come to bring. The water in the jars that are used for the ritual purification of guests is transformed into something new – the good wine that Jesus makes. It is a sign of the ‘new work’ that God is making in Christ, the joyous abundance of the Kingdom. It’s also a ‘sign’ that resonates in our own lives, for it carries a call to transformation ourselves, day in and day out. What transformation would God bring to you today? Perhaps there is a wound of grief that he would heal? Perhaps there is a sin that has been holding you back that he would forgive? Perhaps he would have you know a deeper sense of his presence in your life? How will you open yourself to receive that transformation, so that your life itself becomes a sign of the new wine that Jesus makes.

Almighty God,
in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
make known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.



The call to follow

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. *Mark 1.16-18*

One of the gifts that we receive from the Methodist Church is the Covenant Service. It's always held at the beginning of the year, and it celebrates the covenant bond between God and his people, and is an opportunity to renew commitment in service of Christ. The text for the service includes a very beautiful, but deeply disturbing prayer by John Wesley which contains the words:

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal.

In the Gospel readings for the first couple of Sundays in the year we hear the calling of the disciples, and when we hear that invitation of Jesus to “follow me” our first instinct might be to ask “where to?” It is remarkable that the disciples do follow, and in following spend time with Jesus and become convinced that he is the Christ, and themselves issue the same invitation to others. In their ‘following’ we see the pattern for discipleship that Wesley so beautifully encapsulates in his prayer. The disciple sets out with the Master in anticipation that more will be revealed on the way; Consistently in Jesus’ company it is a dynamic relationship that requires attention, commitment and a willingness to be led where he takes us. ‘Following’ of this sort is about surrendering our own ego’s to become more at the disposal of the one who calls, building our whole lives upon God’s love. Do you expect to learn more about Jesus and to be led to new places as you follow him this year? Would you be able to pray the Covenant Prayer and really mean it?

God of heaven,
you send the gospel to the ends of the earth
and your messengers to every nation:
send your Holy Spirit to transform us
by the good news of everlasting life
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



The call to enlightenment

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Simeon took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,
“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all
peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

Mark 1.16-18

The season following Epiphany draws to a close with the feast of the Presentation of the Lord on 2nd February, recalling what happened to Jesus forty days after his birth. Mary and Joseph carry Jesus into the Temple in order for Mary to be purified and for a sacrifice to be made on their behalf. They meet Simeon and Anna, who, like the other characters in the accounts of Jesus’ birth, instantly recognise what they are seeing and how Jesus fulfils not only their destiny but also that of the whole world. Simeon declares that Jesus is “a light for revelation”, and that’s one of the reasons our worship on this day traditionally includes a candlelight procession, and we call the day ‘Candlemas’.

Jesus is the one bringing light for revelation. Light provides us with comfort, and the warm glow of candle light on a dark winter’s night brings us joy and peace. But there’s another sense in which light can be disturbing. It can show up those things we’d rather not see, as in the rather cruel Gilbert and Sullivan song about the woman who thought she was rather more glamorous than she really was “She might have passed for forty-three in the dusk with the light behind her”. Jesus calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light, so that we might see things about ourselves with new clarity and, literally, be enlightened. His light shows up the truth about ourselves, the truth about God, and gives us real vision. Can you think of times in your life when you have received this kind of ‘enlightenment’? What does it feel like to recall that we live in the light of Christ?

Lord Jesus Christ,
light of the nations and glory of Israel:
make your home among us,
and present us pure and holy
to your heavenly Father,
your God, and our God. Amen.

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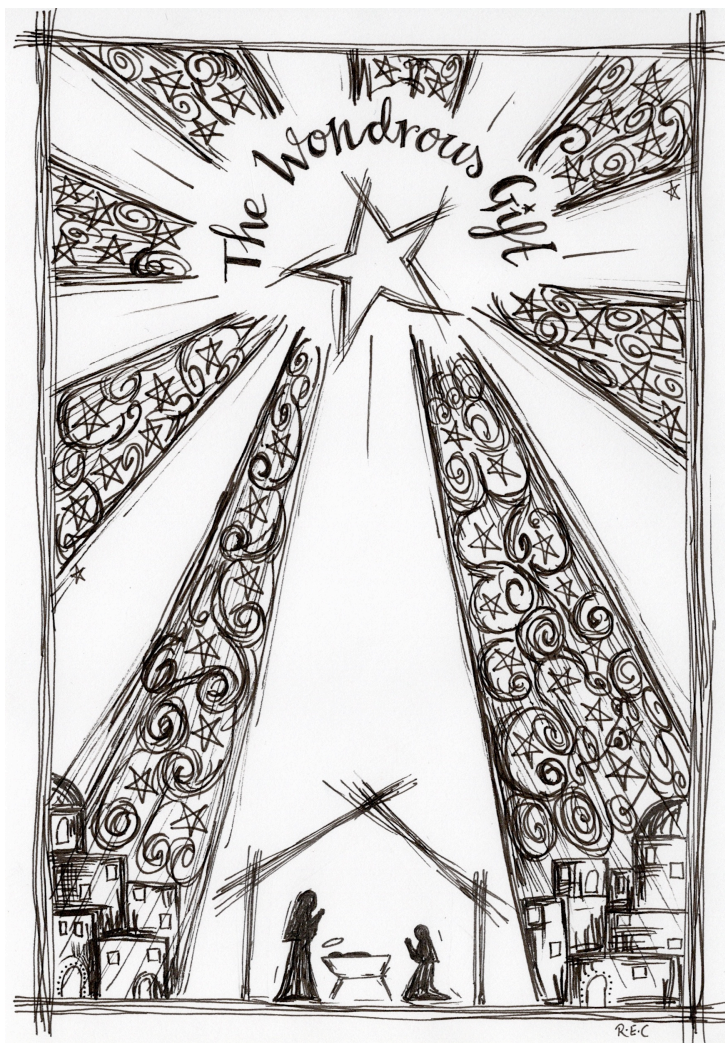
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The video to accompany this booklet can be found on the Facebook pages of The Church Union and The Society. And on The Society's YouTube Channel: <http://sswsh.com/youtube>



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