

# God's First Christmas

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## First hymn *by Isaac Watts (T "Antioch" GF Handel 1685-1759)*

- 1) Joy to the world! The Lord is come; let earth receive her King;  
Let every heart prepare Him room, *and heaven and nature sing, rpt...*
- 2) Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns, let men their songs employ;  
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains *repeat the sounding joy, rpt...*
- 3) He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove  
the glories of His righteousness *and wonders of His love, rpt...*

## Prayer:

Dear heavenly Father, we thank you for the privilege you have given us to bring our prayers and worship to you, knowing that you receive us because we come in the name of your Son. Lead us in this time of worship, and shape us towards yourself. Glorify your name in our midst, and feed us by your word, for we ask this in our Saviour's name, Amen.

## 2nd Hymn *by Cecil Alexander (T "Irby" by Henry Gauntlett 1805-76):*

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) And through all His wondrous childhood day by day like us He grew;  
He was little, weak, and helpless, tears and smiles like us He knew;  
and He feeleth for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness.
- 4) 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.
- 5) Not in that poor and lowly stable, with the oxen standing by, shall we see Him:  
but in heaven, set at God's right hand on high,  
when like stars, his children crown-ed, all in white shall gather round.

## Readings:

- Isaiah 11:1-9
- Luke 1:24-35

### Intercessory prayer:

Dear heavenly Father,

We have been encouraged by St Paul to pray for those in authority over us, knowing that they are given such authority by you. Thank you for them, and we pray for your wisdom and discerning to be given them as they lead us.

We pray for the places where trouble rages, such as Ukraine, asking you for your wisdom and strength to be given to them as they defend their country against their aggressive neighbours. We pray also for the Middle East and the war currently being waged in that land. Because we do not know all that is happening there, and knowing that many bad things happen in war, we pray for wisdom and your personal strengthening of all those who look to you for your guidance. Bless them, and assist them to follow righteousness and justice, and bring a cessation of hostilities as soon as that can happen, and give your mercy to those who are in physical or mental suffering.

And we also pray for all who are ill, or lonely, or depressed - grant that they might know in some measure the peace that only you can give. And in all things, let your will be done, Father, for we ask these prayers in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

### 3rd hymn by C Wesley (*T St. John "The parish choir" 1851*)

- 1) Let earth and heaven combine, angels and men agree,  
to praise in songs divine the incarnate deity,  
our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.
- 2) Unsearchable the love which has our saviour brought;  
the grace is far above or man or angel's thought.  
enough for us, that God we know, for God is manifest below.
- 3) He deigns in flesh to appear, widest extremes to join;  
to bring our vileness near, and make us all divine;  
and we the life of God shall know, for God is manifest below.
- 4) Made perfect first in love,  
and sanctified by grace we shall from earth remove, and see His glorious face:  
then shall His love be fully showed, and man shall then be lost in God.

### Message: "God's first Christmas"

Today we look at some aspects of the nativity story, and emphasise some things about this familiar event. We call it the "incarnation" which means "the enfleshment of God". It is an astonishing idea! I will refer to Luke's version of events in Ch 1 and 2 of his gospel and assume you know them.

All the events God did here were impossible!

Zechariah and Elizabeth were very old, Elizabeth was barren and post-menopausal. Mary had no man in association, and was a virgin as Isaiah foretold . (Is 7:14) Simeon and Anna

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were old, and we never hear of them again. They prophesied accurately about the coming child, prompted by the Holy Spirit.

Much fear affected those in the main events.

The common response at the appearance of Gabriel to Zechariah and Mary was *fear*! (I believe that if Gabriel appeared to us, or to our congregation, we would all be terrified! We would probably be on our faces. Yet we speak so lightly of angels.)

Immediately Gabriel said "Do not be afraid..." Zechariah's neighbours and friends experienced "fear" as result of the amazing events that occurred to Zechariah and Elizabeth – their impossible conception in their old age, and Mary's conception with her being a virgin, as foretold in Isaiah. She was young but knew enough to know that she could not conceive without a man. (Probably today this event would not be possible in the same way – in today's world so many would be cynical wouldn't they?) On the night Jesus was born, the shepherds were "filled with fear" at the announcements of the angels. They were simple men, and the event was extraordinary. It was more awe – a mixture of reverence and fear – at the "numinous" – i.e. "God is in this!" And it was so unique. But their fear was full of *belief*, not cynicism.

It was "the fear of the Lord" i.e. reverent awe.

The events were unlike those of usual human organization – there were no "important" people involved. (None were people of rank.) Mary, who would have been a young teenager comments :

*"He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
and has exalted those who were humble"...*

What normal human thinking would have planned anything like this for the central event of human history? These people were "too old" for human organisations. But not for God! Remember once before a couple that were "too old" had a miracle child – Sarah (90) and Abraham (100) had Isaac! I think God likes doing the unlikely and *delights* in the impossible.

God looked for, and seemed *delighted* with, belief at all times.

Jesus was the same. He was delighted with the faith of the Centurion whose slave was dying. (Luke 7) To the man crippled with paralysis and brought by his friends, "seeing their faith he said to him 'Son your sins are forgiven!'" (Luke 5) and with the woman with the haemorrhage, and with Jairus who was told his daughter had died, to whom Jesus said "Do not fear, only believe!" (Luke 8) (And then He raised her up!) And of course in the nativity events, Zechariah was cautioned and rendered dumb when he *doubted* Gabriel, and Mary was confirmed when she *believed* Gabriel. Gabriel probably enjoyed saying "for nothing shall be impossible with God." (Do we hear him?) And may Mary not have spoken the wisest words ever spoken by human lips when she said –

"Let it be to me according to your word"?

The Holy Spirit seems to have been involved constantly. John was to be "filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb". In fact he "leaped for joy" in his mother's womb when Mary greeted her. And then Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried loudly to

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Mary "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb".

So it seems Mary had already conceived.

Mary was assured by Gabriel that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will over-shadow you". Mary then prophesied (by the Holy Spirit) about what God was doing for her, and her people. Then John was born and on confirming that "his name is John!" Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied about John's ministry at his birth. (All in Luke 1)

Who wrote all this? It was Luke, the most careful and convincing historian in the New Testament, who had investigated extensively, and who wrote the most perfect classical Greek in the New Testament. Nothing was left to chance. He called these facts "the most exact truth about these things" (Luke 1:1-4) And of course, only Luke took the time and effort to investigate all these happenings, and to write about them at the beginning of his record. (He was, of course, a Greek Physician, would have sworn the Hippocratic oath, hence I trust very observant by custom.)

Finally the prevailing quality about this whole record is *joy*! At Mary's greeting the baby John leaped in Elizabeth's womb "*for joy*". Gabriel said to Zechariah "You will have *joy and gladness* and many will rejoice at his (John's) birth. Mary said "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit *rejoices*" in God my Saviour". The angels said to the terrified shepherds "Fear not, I bring you tidings of *great joy* which shall come to all the people..."

What quality fits the Christmas events better than joy?

Joy is not, I believe, a strictly human emotion – happiness is. But happiness depends on "what haps". Joy is independent of those events. It is a God thing. It is a fruit of the Spirit. It is a fruit of the tree in which the sap of the Holy Spirit flows. It is *God's fruit* produced in a human life. Remember Paul and Silas in gaol in Philippi, chained and in a dark, damp prison. What were they doing? "Singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening." They were not sad. And there was a great earthquake! Their chains were unloosed. And they did not run away. The jailer could not believe it! I believe he saw the "joy of the Lord" in them; he believed and came to Christ. (Acts 16, again written by Luke)

Jesus told a story of a servant who was faithful to his master, and the master said "You good and faithful servant *enter into the joy of your Lord.*" *I told you it was a God-thing.* Human beings only manifest it when God has put it into them by His Spirit – it all starts from Him. It comes when God's Spirit indwells them. It is *His joy* shining out of them.

May the joy of the Lord be yours this Christmas time.

Amen.

### Final hymn *by C Wesley (T Mendelssohn 1809-47)*

- 1) Hark the herald angels sing glory to the newborn King,  
peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled,  
Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies;  
with the angelic hosts proclaim "Christ is born in Bethlehem".

*Hark the herald angels sing glory to the newborn King.*

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- 2) Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord,  
late in time behold him come, offspring of a virgin's womb!  
veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity!  
pleased as Man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel.
- 3) Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die,  
born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.  
Hail the heaven-born Prince of peace, hail the Sun of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings.

### Benediction:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing  
so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope!

Amen.

*This service was prepared by Neil McIntosh (M.B.B.S. F.R.A.C.S.) for HopeNet SA*