

WORSHIP AT HOME FOR 27TH DECEMBER 2020 – WHY ARE YOU SEARCHING FOR ME?

Dear Friends,

Here we are at the final service for 2020. What a year it has been – and there is still a way to go yet before we can begin to feel normality creeping back. However, we are here and able to worship together – some in church with its restrictions – some through reading these W@Hs each week, knowing that others are also doing so and that we can feel we are, indeed, worshipping together. This week we look at Samuel and his childhood, and at Jesus as a young boy debating with the rabbis and elders in the Temple in Jerusalem. May I wish you all a Happy New Year and may you find 2021 a good year. Margaret

Call to worship: Lord, you are always there for us – always calling us to share your peace and joy.

You are always there calling us to worship and celebrate your glory.

You are always there – meeting us, holding us, challenging and sharing our lives.

You are there when we need you- and when we turn our backs on you.

Even when we least expect it, Lord, you are there, always there.

We thank you, Lord – and we praise and glorify you. **Amen**

The words to ‘Cradled in a manger, meanly’ written by George Stringer Rowe [1830-1913] StF 197

1 Cradled in a manger, meanly laid the Son of Man his head;

Sleeping his first earthly slumber where the oxen had been fed.

Happy were those shepherds listening to the holy angel’s words;

Happy they within that stable, worshipping their infant Lord.

2 Happy all who hear the message of his coming from above;

Happier still who hail his coming, and with praises greet his love.

Blessed saviour, Child most holy, in a manger thou didst rest;

Canst thou stoop again, yet lower, and abide within my breast?

3 Evil things are there before thee, in the heart, where they have fed,

Wilt thou pitifully enter, Son of Man, and lay thy head?

Enter, then, O Christ most holy; make a Christmas in my heart;

Make a heaven of my manger; it is heaven where thou art.

4 And to those who never listened to the message of thy birth,

Who have winter, but no Christmas bringing them thy peace on earth,

Send to these the joyful tidings by all people, in each home,

Be there heard the Christmas anthem;

Praise to God, the Christ has come!

Prayer:

Gracious God, we praise you today for the power of your word – the way you have spoken to so many people throughout history. You called the universe into being – heaven and earth, night and day, the sea and the dry land – life in its multitude. You spoke and it was done – our world, and our very existence owing to you. In time you called Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Joshua – judges, kings and prophets. Later apostles, disciples, preachers and teachers – a great company of saints, each testifying to your sovereign purpose, your awesome power and your merciful love. Each hearing your voice and responding in faith. You came to us in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh – identifying yourself with our humanity – sharing our joy and sorrow – experiencing our life and death. You came in fulfilment of your promises of old, revealing the extent of your love through everything Jesus said and did, demonstrating your graceful purpose for all.

And you speak still through the pages of Scripture; through their record of your involvement in history and their testimony to your will for the world. You speak through the dialogue between Christians – through the witness of your Church and through personal testimony – through study and reflection – and through the sharing of fellowship. We hear you speak through the splendour of the universe – the wonder of life, your still, small voice breaking into our experience to challenge and inspire.

Where we have not listened to your voice, Lord, we are sorry, for then we go wrong in many ways. Forgive us and speak to us again, as you walk alongside us, that we might start afresh.

Gracious Lord, we thank you for the ways in which you have spoken to us in the past and in the way you still continue to speak today. We hear your word with joyful thanksgiving, and we pray for the strength to make it so much a part of us that your voice may be heard in all we are and do, to the glory of your name. For your word of life we praise you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer: 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 trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I Samuel 2: 18-20 & 26 – taken from New Living Translation of the Bible:

Now Samuel, though only a boy, was the Lord's helper. He wore a linen tunic just like that of a priest. Each year his mother made a small coat for him and brought it to him when she came with her husband for the sacrifice. Before they returned home, Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife and say: 'may the Lord give you other children to take the place of this one she gave to the Lord.'

Meanwhile, as young Samuel grew taller, he also continued to gain favour with the Lord and with the people.

Comment: A story of a boy whose childhood was negotiated between family and service to God., symbolised here by the mention of the two garments – the linen tunic such as the priests wore – and also the coat, or robe, which his mother made him – home clothes rather than a uniform. She brought it to him on the only time she visited her child each year as the family came to the Temple to worship.

We are left to imagine the impact this upbringing might have had on the boy – left in the Temple away from maternal love, and knowing that his mother now had other children to take his place.

Samuel had been consecrated by his mother and he had been handed over to the priest Eli once he could be – probably he was 3, maybe 4 years old. We have read of his one connection to home. Being the robe, or cloak, which his mother made – and throughout his life he always wore a robe like the ones she made. Years later, King Saul grabbed at Samuel to stop him from leaving and tore the robe, leading Samuel to make a devastating prophecy: 'See? The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and given it to someone else – someone who is better than you!'

Samuel had a strong, forthright personality but it hid an insecurity. All his life he carried within him a little boy clinging to the memory of his mother. A divine calling does not mean one is immune against the complexities of human psychology. He knew he was called by the Lord to prophecy and he was faithful to his calling – but still, that little boy left to grow up away from his home and family tugged at him. When we understand the background we may appreciate even more the steadfast following of the call from God – the putting aside of one's own wishes to serve the divine.

The words to 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning' by Reginald Heber [1783-1826]. StF 227

- 1 Brightest and best of the sons of the morning, dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning, guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

- 2 Cold on his cradle the dew-drops are shining; low lies his head with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore him in slumber reclining, Maker and Monarch, and Saviour of all.
- 3 Say, shall we yield him, in costly devotion, odours of Edom, and offerings divine,
Gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean, myrrh from the forest or gold from the mine?
- 4 Vainly we offer each ample oblation,; vainly with gifts would his favour secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration; dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.
- 5 Brightest and best of the sons of the morning, dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning, guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Luke 2: 41-52 – taken from The Message, translation by Eugene Peterson:

Every year Jesus' parents travelled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the feast. When it was over, and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbours. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem, looking for him.

The next day they found him in the Temple, seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed – they were upset and hurt.

His mother said: 'Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you.'

He said: 'Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?' But they had no idea what he was talking about.

So he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

Comment: This is the only biblical story of Jesus' childhood – and we can see Jesus developing normally, distancing himself from his parents as he grows up. Mary and Joseph seem to experience the same dilemmas, and suffer the same agonies, as the parents of any independent-minded child. When to protect and when to let go – questions which make parenting a bit of a poser. Here, Jesus is at the point of transition between the domestic world of home and the public world of challenge and debate. Maybe this account of his growing up might reassure teenagers longing to break out from the expectations of their parents.

Before we go on with the story of how Jesus stayed behind when the others started home we could look a little at the background.

At the age of 12, a Jewish boy officially becomes a man and takes on the associated duties and obligations. Jesus and his parents had travelled to Jerusalem to attend his first Passover [the meal to commemorate the exodus of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt] When it was time to go home, the women would have travelled together and set out earlier than the men. The men would follow later and both parties would meet up at the evening camp. You can imagine that both Mary and Joseph thought that Jesus was travelling with the other parent. 'I thought he was with you!' 'No! I thought he was with you!' Eventually Jesus was found – in the Temple where the Sanhedrin [the supreme Jewish court] was meeting in public to discuss religious and theological questions.

Jesus learnt in the Temple by asking questions. He probed – pointing out inconsistencies, thinking through logical consequences – perhaps providing counter examples. The teachers obviously enjoyed the

stimulation from this intelligent young man and challenged him to come up with his own answers. The teachers and he were exploring together.

After three days' search, Mary and Joseph eventually found Jesus listening to the discussions and asking questions. You can understand the mixture of profound relief when they found him mixed with anger and hurt at his not worrying about not being with them and travelling home as expected. He was growing away from their little boy and moving toward his destiny.

It was significant that at the same time as he reached adulthood, Jesus also acknowledged who he was and who his father was. Jesus became aware of his status as an adult and the value God had placed upon him. It was this knowledge that gave him the motivation to return home with his parents, continue to learn the trade of a carpenter and allow his future to remain secure in God's hands.

Luke shapes his telling of Jesus' birth and childhood with the story of Samuel in mind. The Magnificat mirrors Hannah's song [1 Samuel 2: 1-10]. Both children had remarkable births, clearly destined for something special from the start. We may, none of us, remember being born, but we are all affected by the circumstances of our birth. Were we planned - or not? Were we wanted – or not?

Children who were adopted – or conceived through IVF, or through surrogacy, have to be told somewhere along the line and helped to process the knowledge.

Some children, like Jesus, grow up in a loving family; others, like Samuel, for some reason live apart from their parents. All our backgrounds are bound to colour how we live our lives and how we react to events. A sense of divine favour – the knowledge that we are loved by God, no matter who we are or what our circumstances – that is a precious gift.

Meditation of a rabbi in the Jerusalem temple. [Nick Fawcett]

Who was this boy, we wondered – so discerning, so deep, so mature for his years? He wasn't your everyday youngster, that's for sure, having instead an aura about him – unlike anything I've encountered before.

And those questions he asked: astonishing! – time and again making us scratch our heads not just in wonder but in bewilderment, for he brought out truths from the scriptures we had scarcely considered – and came up with answers to conundrums that had foxed us for years.

It was uncanny, unnerving – almost as though he could read God's mind – but, of course, it's blasphemy even to think such a thing, let alone say it out loud.

He would have to be God's Son for that – the promised Messiah – and clearly he wasn't, for suddenly his parents arrived, all of a panic, scolding the lad for having wandered off and got himself lost.

It's strange, though, for we were the assumed experts in the Law, yet that whippersnapper taught us so much that day, making God real in a way we secretly all wanted to emulate.

And there is something else, more puzzling still; he seemed surprised at his parents' concern, saying they should have known to look in his Father's house, almost as though it were here in the Temple, among the things of God, that he felt most at home.

Am I missing something?

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for revealing the Father – not just speaking his word but coming among us, walking our earth, sharing our flesh and blood, to make known his glory, greatness, power and purpose. Thank you for giving God a human face – one we can understand and relate to intimately – making his love real to us. Draw us closer to you and so closer to him. **Amen.**

Laying his glory and majesty aside, God is content to enter human life as a vulnerable baby.

Father, breathe your life into every worshipping community however and wherever they worship in these difficult days – and wherever there is any disunity, bring your healing touch.

Father, breathe your peace into our world both in individuals and nations.

Father breathe your joy into our homes and places of work and leisure.

Father, breathe your comfort into all who suffer, whether mentally, physically, emotionally or spiritually.

Father, breathe your hope into those who feel they have little to live for.

Father, breathe your refreshment and delight into our attitudes until we live in thankfulness.

God of glory, we thank you for loving us.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen**

Colossians 3: 12-17 taken from New Living Translation. *Paul's advice to us – Living the New Life.*

Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves you must clothe yourselves with tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. You must make allowances for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful.

Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise. Use his words to teach and counsel each other. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, all the while giving thanks through him to God the Father.

The words to 'It came upon the midnight clear' written by Edmund Hamilton Sears [1810-1876] StF 205

1 It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold.
Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven's all-glorious King!
The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.

2 Still through the cloven skies they come, with peaceful wings unfurled;
And still their heavenly music floats o'er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lonely plains they bend on hovering wing;
And ever o'er its babel sounds the blessed angels sing.

3 Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not the love song which they bring.
O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing.

4 For lo, the days are hastening on to prophets shown of old,
When with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold,
When the new heaven and earth shall own the Prince of Peace their King,
And all the world repeat the song which now the angels sing.

Closing Prayer Have no fear for he is Lord and he is with you and will walk with you, and talk with you and be in you and you in him always.

No matter who you are or what you have done; no matter where you are or what you are facing; no matter how you feel or whether you understand it, the truth is this; you can go in hope, in joy and peace, for Christ has come!

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all and those whom we love now and for evermore. **Amen**