

Dorset South & West. Written Service.
Sunday December 31st 2023.
Prepared by Revd Jean Quick.



Out of the ordinaryFirst Sunday of Christmas
New Year's Eve
Watch night
Freedom's Eve.

Opening liturgy

Christmas God, life for the world, Emmanuel, God with us, we have celebrated and rejoiced, marvelled at your gift and giving, now we worship you again.

Christmas God, we greet and meet you.

We have dreams and we have visions,
we have yearnings and desires,
we have hopes and fears,
but in Jesus we find consolation and redemption.

Christmas God, we greet and meet you.

We are young and we are old,
we are from north and south and east and west, we are strong and we are frail,
we are well and we are ill.

Christmas God, we greet and meet you.

We've heard your message in unexpected places.
We've encountered you when we were seeking and when we were not.
We've heard you in a cacophony of voices.
Our waiting has been fulfilled.

Christmas God, we greet and meet you.

Christmas Day is passed but Christmas is not over. Out of the ordinary has come the most extraordinary. Out of the waiting has come the gift of life. Out of the unexpected has come glory, redemption and revelation.
In others we have seen you and simply pray this day, that in us, others see you too. **Amen.**

STF 193

Born in the night,
Mary's Child,
a long way from your home;
coming in need,
Mary's Child,
born in a borrowed room.

Truth of our life,
Mary's Child,
you tell us God is good;
prove it is true,
Mary's Child,
go to your cross of wood.

Clear shining light,
Mary's Child,
your face lights up our way;
light of the world,
Mary's Child,
dawn on our darkened day.

Hope of the world,
Mary's Child,
you're coming soon to reign;
King of the earth,
Mary's Child,
walk in our streets again.

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:22-40. Jesus Presented in the Temple

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord" and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons.")

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never

left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Reflection.

There are so many occasions when we are watching and waiting with anticipation but perhaps none so exciting as waiting to see a new born child. I was watching one of those antique programs where people sell their treasured possessions and the question is always put, "what will you do with the money?" One particular episode was so moving when a Grandmother discovered in the hunt around her home, treasured possessions from her grandmother. Questioned if she wanted to hold onto them? She replied, with such emotion, "no I want to raise enough money so I can go and see and hold my new grandson in America." As each item sold she was so emotional and could just about say, "more cuddles". To let go of everything that is seemingly unimportant, so that you can hold onto what is really important, is so vital in everything that we watch and wait for.

This day we are on the cusp of something that could as our theme for services this December has been, something so.... 'Out of the ordinary!'

Maybe that's why the television programs that review the past year are so popular. They help us to look back at what has been and hopefully to move on into 2024 with hope and resolve for a better future, for us and for our world.

Perhaps you have attended Watch Night services in the past. I certainly have and many began with a church social then moved into a time of prayer and worship as we moved into the new year.

Watch Night" services began in 1733 with the Moravian communities in what is now the Czech Republic. By 1740 John Wesley and Methodism had adopted the tradition, with New Year's Eve services ending after midnight, marked by penitence over shortcomings in the past year and a resolution for greater faithfulness in the year ahead. Looking at the history of the watch night service it's interesting to see two different strands emerging and yet intertwined in so many ways.

Within Methodism and in other denominations, there has always been an emphasis on what might be termed 'the social gospel'. Caring for others. Someone aptly described it as, the church being able to look out of its windows and act with Christ like love. I am mentioning Methodism because of its historical significance with the emergence of the Watch Night service, however much of what I am saying applies thankfully to all denominations. It's interesting for instance, to look at how from the outset Methodist societies were active in the abolitionist movement. If we look at American Methodism, which is important for the strand of watch night service that became known as, Freedoms Eve. The early Methodist conference in the US called for the expulsion of any member participating in the slave trade. Imagine that for a moment, the numerous industries that employed slave labour and if you were involved in it you could be excommunicated! It's a challenging thought when we think of how people's freedom is exploited even today. Would we be prepared to exclude people from our congregations if they, or we are involved in ways that demean others?

But there's a wonderful hope in what watch night became, Freedoms Eve. The watch night service began with the Moravians in 1733, but the service took on special significance especially for African Americans, when on the eve of January 1, 1863 Abraham Lincoln designated that the Emancipation Proclamation would become law. After over two centuries in slavery, Americans of African descent would finally be set free by the law.

This meant that on New Year's Eve, 1862, slaves gathered all over in churches, homes, and wherever they could meet, to celebrate and wait together for the moment that the Emancipation Proclamation would become law. The faithful offered prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God that first Watch Night for finally gaining their freedom.

We long for a fresh start, a new beginning, some sign of hope, in so many ways in this coming new year. In Luke 2:22 – 40, we see a man who is also longing for a sign of hope for his people – Simeon.

Simeon is an older man who is "looking forward to the consolation of Israel," (v. 25). He has waited a long time for release and freedom. He longs for freedom from the occupying power of the Roman Empire which exacts a heavy toll on his people. Simeon longs for a restoration of the people of Israel. He longs to see the Messiah, the Anointed One, who will lead his people once again into the fullness of the Promised Land. And, the scripture says, "the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah" (Luke 2:26).

Waiting and watching all his life, Simeon wonders, how long will it be?

It's very likely that he has become weary of waiting by this point. As every season turns and each year passes, he gets older and his body gets weaker and more fragile. It may be that he even longs now for a different freedom – freedom from life.

I've met some people for whom death is not a dreaded thing, but a welcomed event. After long years of suffering, they long to see God face to face. They long to be released from their body, to experience an existence that transcends this earthly one.

I can imagine that fateful morning when Simeon rose from his bed one more day. Every joint creaks. Each step is a painful reminder of every fall, every bad habit, every illness. Most days he simply potters around the house, not venturing far from his front door step. But this morning he feels restless, and follows an urge to make the slow walk to the Temple. "Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple..." (2:27).

And there he saw the child.

How did he know this was the One? Was there a halo-like glow around his smooth little head? Did he hear the rumours of shepherds who claimed to have seen angels proclaiming the birth of the Messiah? Or did he simply hear a still, small voice whispering, "There, Simeon. There he is."

"...and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God."

Then he uttered those touching words of hope. "Lord now you let your servant go in peace, your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light to reveal you to the nations, and the glory to your people Israel."

But it is a bittersweet ending, for he goes on to prophesy the fate of this little boy, the fate of his people, and the fate of Mary herself.

And isn't this just the way it is when our hopes *are* fulfilled? Yes, we are happy when we achieve what we have worked for, when we get what we were promised. And yet, there is a bittersweetness to it. Because it means that one chapter has ended, and another is about to begin. And we may very well be in for more than we bargained for once we enter this new stage of our lives. There can be an uneasy feeling of dread as we speculate about the unknown that lies ahead.

It is like that for so much of what we hope for. We rejoice at the birth of a child and quickly ask "what will they become, what will life hold for them?" Then we watch and life has of course, its twist's and turns. The very thought of Freedom's Eve is wonderful indeed but we know racism is still something we have to deal with and eradicate. When we look back at 2023 are we going to grasp 2024 and make it a year of freedom from all that shackles us as individuals or as a society, from doing something so out of the ordinary for the gospels sake? What will be our goal for Freedom's Eve?

There is of course another voice in the temple. It is the voice of Anna. Like Simeon, she is older as well. She was in her eighties, a prophetess who never left the temple, but worshiped there with fasting and prayer day and night. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:37). Thank goodness for Anna! She is a woman of great faith and devotion. Despite the difficulties of life she must have faced in her long life as a widow and a widow after such a few years of marriage. She devoted herself to prayer and worship. Anna speaks to those in the temple and reminds them that this is no time for apprehension and dread. This is a time for celebration! This precious newborn is given to us as a sign that God has not forgotten us! We've come this far by faith! God will fulfil his promises. He will continue to do something so, Out of the Ordinary.

On this Watch Night, this Freedom's Eve, I am encouraged by the thought that God is still at work in the world, just as God has always been. Perhaps life and even faith has become so commonplace that we no longer see the out of the ordinary things God is still doing? God is still filling people with hope that, no matter what lies ahead, we can take comfort that we've come this far by faith. And God will take us the rest of the way, of this, we can be sure.

I do not know what treasures from the past you will take forward into the new year but I wonder what you might be prepared to give up so that you can truly experience what God can do that will be so, Out of the Ordinary in 2024? This is Freedom's Eve, let us watch and give thanks to God by how we use this New Year, this gift of life and hope.

STF 330

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy,

repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Prayers of Intercession .

Prayers for those closest to us.

I Invite you to think of someone from the different generations you have known – someone younger or older. Perhaps a grandchild, a neighbour, a work colleague, a teacher, a godchild, niece or nephew. With this

person in mind, I ask you to think of something that they would have in common, and one thing that is different between them.

Give thanks and pray for all these people who are part of your life, ask God to help you to be a blessing in their lives.

Prayers for those in our churches and neighbourhood.

I invite you again to think about people from different generations that you have come into contact with in your community. Not perhaps just the people you are closest to.

Give thanks and pray for all these people who are part of your life, ask God to help you to be a blessing in their lives.

Prayers for those who are part of our nation's future.

I invite you to think of those who have been in the national news. Perhaps part of the New Years honours list? Or people whose lives and Freedom seem to be in difficulty.

Let us also remember that on May 6, 2023, King Charles III and Queen Consort Camilla were crowned. Pray for our Royal Family and those in Government.

Give thanks and pray for all these people who are part of your life, ask God to help you to be a blessing in their lives.

Prayers for those in our troubled world.

I invite you to recall the events that come to mind of the troubles we have witnessed in this passing year.

The ongoing conflict caused by the Russian invasion of the Ukraine .

The energy and economic crisis and how it is affecting people of all ages and backgrounds.

The ongoing war between Palestine and Israel, pray for those caught up in the conflict and for peace to come to this troubled region.

Give thanks and pray for all these people, ask God to help those who need a blessing in their lives.

Prayers for ourselves

Take a moment to thank God for this past year. Try to recall what you were most thankful for. Then commit to God your hopes and fears for the future.

Give thanks and pray for all those people who are part of your life, ask God to help you to be a blessing in their lives.

Let us unite our prayers in the words of the **Lord's Prayer**

A Hymn for the new year by Andrew Pratt.

(Text based on Jeremiah 31: 7-14) Metre: 12.11.12.11.

Suggested tunes: "The road and miles to Dundee" (StF 604) or "Streets of Laredo"

This day is a day of both prayer and of praising,
of gath'ring the nations from east and from west,
the people far south, from the north are arising,
this day is the day when the nations are blessed.

This year is the year of divine consolation
The poor will not stumble, the weak will not fall.
The hungry are feasting, the children are dancing.
The outcast are welcomed, they come at God's call.

This vision of newness, of hope for the future,
is set out before us as challenge and choice,
yes this is the labour to which God is calling,
to bring in this kingdom, this cause to rejoice.

The Blessing

Lord, You make all things new
You bring hope alive in our hearts
And cause our Spirits to be born again
Thank you for this new year
For all the potential it holds.
Come and kindle in us A mighty flame
So that in our time, many will see the wonders of God
And live forever to praise Your glorious name. **Amen**

