**Service of Lessons and Carols 18 Dec 2022**

**Welcome and introduction**

Welcome to Dursley Tabernacle and our carol service. We have nine carols to sing tonight so I hope you are in good voice. There will be short bible readings between the carols and this year a number of our members will be sharing personal stories about what their faith means to them.

Like being at the cinema there are a few notices to get through first before we begin.

A word about safety: If the fire alarm should sound please evacuate the building immediately. Those with mobility problems please wait and someone will assist you. The fire exits are the two doors at the back and the door on my right via the ramp. The muster point is on the church drive outside. Our fire officer, Rod Irvine is present and should there be a fire he will operate the fire extinguishers and make the call to the emergency services.

At the end of the service you are all welcome to stay and enjoy seasonal refreshments, mulled wine, mince pies and all that, which will be served at the back of church.

There will be a retiring collection as you leave for Christian Aid. WE know in this country the cost of living has increased. Whilst we as a church are trying to help those in our local community we are also mindful that we are part of a world community that has great need. Christian Aid works in some of the poorest communities in the world and so any money you give as you leave the church tonight will go towards their work. Don’t feel you have to give, but if you want to give, you could also fill in a Gift Aid envelope to make your gift go further.

Once again, welcome to this carol service. The service will proceed unannounced. If you are doing a reading, just come to the lectern at the right moment. The words to all the carols are on the screens. If you can’t see the screens, hymn books are available at the back – but you will need to sit at the sides of the church to read it because the lights are going down now!

LIGHTS DOWN

Let us come and adore him, Christ the Lord

We stand to sing our first carol:

**CAROL 160 O Come all ye faithful**

Prayer

**Bidding prayer**

As Christmastide approaches, we gather to hear again

the message of the angels, to travel in heart and mind

to Bethlehem and glimpse our God, incarnate as a

baby born on a dirt floor.

We gather to be reminded of the brokenness of

human behaviour, and the loving response of

our God, bringing glorious redemption through

a holy child.

As you appeared to Shepherds and kings, appear to us O God and make your presence known. As you spoke to Mary and used her in your purposes, speak into our lives and show us how we may be part of your loving work in this world.

As the angels announced peace to the earth, may we be inspired to work for peace and seek justice for all.

You are God with us – with us in our weakness, frailty and sin. God with us in our celebrations, achievements and joy.

Tonight fill us with your joy as we celebrate again the birth of your son Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen

*Isaiah 9.2-7 - Graham Dixon*

**144 It came upon the midnight clear**

*Luke 1.26-33 – Claire Reynard*

*Introduction*

I was once at a Christmas Party and someone found out I was a church minster. They decided to have some fun with me. ‘The Christmas story – you don’t really believe it do you? Choirs of angels, virgin births, wish upon a star and all that? Its just a big children’s story. You may as well start it with the words ‘once upon a time’’.

‘Well, elements of the Christmas story are fantastic and sadly they can be dismissed as just a children’s story’ I said. ‘I have no idea whether it happened that way’ I continued. ‘But the message of Christmas I do believe in. That God is with us, we are not alone. We are loved whoever we are. There is hope even in dark places.’

‘Who do you put your hope in?’ I asked back.

They then started to talk about football as a diversion from the serious personal challenge I made to them and the conversation got shut down.

Don’t put your hope in a football team. There is only one winner and all the rest are losers!

Interspersed between our Christmas readings this evening are a few personal stories of faith in this modern sceptical age

*Carolyn Jones*

*So it’s that time of year again, when we talk about Angels and stars, nostalgic visions of a baby in a manger and they all lived happily ever after…….*

*Except they didn’t, and it would have been cold, uncomfortable and smelly, oh hey is that present for me – oh thank you so much, what? What was I talking about – oh nothing it’s just a story.*

*Except is it just a story?*

*I don’t believe it is just a story and I would encourage you all to read on past the initial bit and reflect of what happens after this “fairytale birth” (the bit we conveniently leave out – because its not very nice to think about – and I’m not about to share it all here but encourage you to explore for yourself in the book of Matthew Chapter 2) – and for the sceptics among you there is historical evidence of the events recorded taking place.*

*Back to why I believe these things actually happened. I was introduced to Jesus many, many years ago. For me it was a blinding flash and heavenly choirs moment and completely overwhelming.*

 *(probably a bit like the shepherds experienced – it does happen)*

*And I could take a long time and tell you God did this, God did that. Happy times, sad times, even sadder times but would it change YOUR life.*

*Jesus is as relevant and present today as he was all those years ago. He is the reason why I am not constantly reaching for something to numb the hurt and pain that I have experienced. Why I am not hiding, refusing to engage with people or the world. Jesus gives me HOPE, Hope and strength that I can face the day and all it brings, hope that a difference can be made –however small.*

*It isn’t a magic wand or a lottery ticket, pain and suffering doesn’t just magically disappear, but it’s about each and every one of us and what we do and the choices we make it changes your life but don’t expect a fairytale “Happy ever After”, I can however guarantee HOPE. There are times when I am frustrated, depressed, angry. I don’t get it right everyday and I can be grumpy, uncharitable and very “unchristian” – but – Jesus comes alongside me and slips his hand into mine and says quietly come with me.*

*So when, as you go home tonight or over the next few days look up at the stars and try and remember what it felt like when you were first aware of how many stars there are (that sense of wonder, awe and smallness) and while Jesus has his hand in mine and is talking to me, he has his hand reaching out to you and you and you to people all around the world and he is saying come and walk with me, talk with me. Don’t ignore him, this is the Wonder and Awe that we have, he can be with each and everyone of us and you are the only thing that matters to him and it just blows your mind like the night sky and he can take you on an amazing life journey, where each one of us will have different reasons to be thankful that someone introduced us to Jesus*

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

**163 Angels from the realms of glory**

*Matthew 1.18-25 – Liz Swanwick*

*Michael Purton*

*I’ve been a Christian about 18 months now, and the way God reached me was by overwhelming me with his love when I finally opened my heart to Him.*

*Up until that moment when Jesus took hold of me, I’d had the same mindset as Joseph when he decided he’d divorce Mary.*

*Joseph didn’t believe that Mary’s baby could be the Son of God. I didn’t think that there could really be a God - it seemed too far-fetched, too much like a fairytale.*

*I say that I didn’t think there could really be a God, but the truth is that I wasn’t really thinking. Because to not believe in God is to not really think, to not really look at the evidence.*

*As a culture, we see the Christmas story as a fairytale, as something for children. We know the nativity story so well that we don’t really think about whether it was true and what that means.*

*Since becoming a Christian, and starting to really think, I’ve realised that there is overwhelming scientific evidence that a higher power exists. I’ve also discovered that there is undeniable historic evidence that Jesus existed and was who he claimed to be.*

*I only have 5 minutes now so I won’t explain all of that scientific and historic evidence.*

*Instead I’ll focus on the strongest evidence for God, and that is that we all know instinctively that He exists. If we’re honest with ourselves, deep down we just know He’s there.*

*In Romans 1:19, St Paul says that we “know the truth about God because he has made it obvious” to us.*

*When my eldest son was born in December 2016, we thought he’d been stillborn. He came out and he didn’t breathe.*

*I’ll never forget being led by one midwife into the corridor to watch as she massaged his heart while her colleague called for an ambulance.*

*My partner was still in the birthing pool, in shock, terrified, heartbroken. There I was alone in the corridor watching as they tried to save our baby’s life.*

*What was my instinctive reaction? To whisper ‘Please God, please God, please God, let him live, let him live.’*

*I wasn’t a Christian. I hadn’t been to church in years. But my instinct was to cry out to God.*

*And our son took a breath and cried out. And now, 6 years on, he never stops calling out to me.*

*Why did I reach out to God in my desperation in that corridor? Because I’d always known He was there.*

*We know there’s a God because his fingerprints are all over us.*

*That was December 3, 2016. Fast forward two weeks and I’d dismissed that experience of Him that I’d had in that maternity unit corridor.*

*Why? I was blind to Him. Our atheistic, cynical culture blinds us to God. We’ve been conditioned to dismiss Him as a myth.*

*We’ve been conditioned to believe that love, family, money, career success, fame etc will satisfy us, but they never do.*

*We achieve what we were aiming for, we get what we wanted, and there’s a momentary high, a fleeting satisfaction, and then we’re back to feeling empty again.*

*We love our partner, we love our children, we love our family, we love our job – but we still feel empty.*

*Why do we feel empty? Because we were all made with a hole in our heart that only Jesus can satisfy. Like a baby taken away from our mother, we cry and cry – we long for Him.*

*I finally reached out to Him last summer in a moment of utter despair, when my life was falling apart.*

*When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, I’m sure he felt that his life was falling apart.*

*The account in the book of Matthew doesn’t say whether Joseph reached out to God in despair prior to the angel visiting him, but in his heart I’m sure Joseph was calling out for answers.*

*18 months ago, when I was in despair, I reached out and I asked ‘Jesus, if you’re there, please come into my life.’*

*And He answered. He said, I love you.*

*I was hit with a wave of emotion. Overwhelmed. In floods of tears. I was like a child finally embraced by their mother after years and years of crying out.*

*He said, I love you, I love you, I love you.*

*He said, I love you so much I came to Earth as a vulnerable baby and I died the most excruciating death possible just to save you.*

*I said, But I’ve been such a bad person. I’ve hurt so many people.*

*He said, I love you, I love you, I love you.*

*He said, Let Me heal you. Let Me give you a new heart.*

*Now I’m not suddenly a completely different person – I’m still an idiot at times, I still make mistakes, I still suffer like everyone else.*

*But my perspective is different. His love has given me a joy and peace so deep and unshakeable that I can face anything. It’s the joy and peace of knowing He’ll always be with me.*

*When the angel visited Joseph, he transformed his perspective. That’s what knowing God does – changes the way you see life.*

*In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says: Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.*

*We’re conditioned to be cynical. We see something as pure and simple as the story of Jesus, the story of God’s love for us, and our default response is to dismiss the whole thing.*

*It’s such a simple message: God made us and He loves us so much that he sent his Son to willingly die for us in order to save us. But our hardened hearts want to reject that good news.*

*But if we look at the evidence, if we really think about it, if we reach out to Him and ask ‘Jesus, are you there?’ he does answer.*

*And his answer is, I love you.*

**167 Once in Royal David’s City**

*Luke 2.1-7*

*Pastor Mick*

You might remember Pastor Mick being featured a few times on the BBC during the pandemic and his work with desperate people in my home town of Burnley. We are the same age and who knows our paths may have crossed once. I read an interview with him the other day about his life and it is truly remarkable.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Born into a working-class Catholic family in Burnley, Mick Fleming’s life took a terrible turn when he was raped on his way to school, aged just eleven. In an unbelievably tragic twist, his older sister died that very same night. Not knowing how to process his pain led to a lifetime of drug and alcohol abuse, violence and crime.

Eventually, a breakdown and several miraculous encounters led him to find hope and healing in Jesus.

He describes how he saw an angel that changed his whole life

*I was in a homeless hostel, and it was the first time in my life that I was not relying on drugs or alcohol. I had these feelings that I didn’t know what to do with. I didn’t know who I was. So l prayed, and I saw a light at the bottom of the bed.*

*There was a huge, white being, and my first thought was: I’m going back to the doctor tomorrow, perhaps I need my medication upped. And then the angel spoke. He said: “God wants you to do something – will you do it?” I said: “That depends what it is.” He said: “He wants you to go and stand against this wall” – and he told me where the wall was – “at exactly seven o’clock.”*

*As it got to quarter to seven, I thought: I’ve got to go. At seven, a man came round the corner. I’d never spoken to him before but he worked at the hostel. He was a recovering drug addict, and was running a Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting. So that’s how I got into recovery.*

*The day after, the angel came again, and said God wanted me to forgive the man who had hurt me, and to tell everybody about Jesus. I told the angel I didn’t want to forgive the man who had hurt me and I never would.*

*About six months later I was in McDonald’s. There was a guy who [I could tell] was an alcoholic. I got him a drink and a burger and started talking to him. I ended up getting him into [NA] meetings and he got clean.*

*He died two years later, because he damaged himself with alcohol and drugs, and I never told him that I knew, right from the moment I first saw him, that he was the man who raped me.*

*The truth is that I arranged to meet him again because I wanted to kill him. I had a knife with me, but I had a realisation in that moment. I thought: I’ve lived with what he did to me for 30 years. I’ve destroyed myself and everybody around me. My sin has been bad enough. Why would I live in somebody else’s?*

*It was that simple. Peace flooded in. It transformed me. I used to think that forgiveness was putting my arms around somebody and saying: “Don’t worry about it, it’s fine!” That’s not my understanding now.*

Pastor Mick has just written a book ‘Blown away’ and its an amazing read and encouraging to know God is at work in Burnley.

**155 While Shepherds watched**

*Luke 2.8-20 - Terry Larkham*

This year we have really developed and expanded our surplus food ministry – a work that we started during the pandemic. It is partly about food waste and partly about food poverty. We take surplus food from supermarkets food that is about to go out of date, and first of all send some of that on to people we know who are in need and then what’s left put outside the Tab on our market stall. The stall came about in the summer . we saw it on Facebook market for sale in Birmingham. It was priced at £500 we approached the sellers who said that someone else was interested and had offered a £1000. When we told them what we wanted it for, they gave it to us for nothing.

Many of the team are here tonight. They pick food up from supermarkets, even going down to M&S at Cribbs once a week. They bag it up and distribute it around homes in the town. They man the Community Food Hub a few times a week and put food on the stall. Thankyou for all your hard work -it makes a difference.

*Heidi Horn*

***Heidi has been one of the lead figures in this surplus food ministry. Many years ago God spoke into her life and that revelation changed her: Heidi can you tell us about it?...***

*I was in a Church sitting behind a guy that I vaguely knew. He was not naturally someone I would choose to hang out with. He smelt bad, looked unclean, swore a lot, and we didn't appear to have anything in common. I had always tried to "do the right thing", be nice, smile, tolerate him, but it wasn't a natural relationship, definitely forced.*

*Anyway this one day, I'm sat there and I had this period of time, that I know factually was only a minute or even less, but felt to me like quite a long period of time. Maybe an hour or more. This guy is in front of me, and suddenly I'm not seeing him through my eyes at all. He just looks like the sweetest most adorable little child,  bumbling around in a completely beautiful sweet way, like the ideal dream little child and each time he falls over, or does anything wrong, my heart just feels like its overflowing with love. Like when you look at your own child (or a kid you find as adorable as if they were your own!) on their very best behaviour, when they were little and they do something cute.*

*And I know, like properly KNOW that this was God showing me how the guy looks to him. I can't prove this. But I absolutely KNOW it to be true.*

*And suddenly I was back to being just normal me and the guy was back to being a stinky, guy in dirty clothes, but everything was different. Because I knew that I needed to see him how God does, and even though I was back to human reality, I felt completely differently about this guy. I knew that he was loved by God, and in fact that everyone was loved by God and we have to treat everyone with that in mind - that everyone is God's children.*

***You still needed a further nudge about the truth of this?***

*Anyway, because I'm a bit dense, I still didn't really get that any of this applied directly to me. And then, because as well as being dense, I'm also a massive geek, I was reading a (fairly dull) book about prayer, because I was trying to improve my prayer life. And whilst I  was sat there, trying to get into this incredibly dull book, I heard God saying, "Heidi, you are my child. You are a child of God".*

*I know that sounds completely cheesy, but it's what I heard, and it was hugely what I needed to hear, because at the time, I felt like I wasn't loved. (Turns out I was wrong by the way - but noone was saying it to me!). What was weirder tho was that having been around Churches all of my life, I'd literally never heard this "Child of God" phrase. Like, I'm not saying that noone said it, but I absolutely never heard it myself! And since then, I've heard it a lot.*

***How did that experience change you?***

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*Anyway, for me this was properly life changing, because if I am a child of God, then actually, who cares what the rest of the World think about me?!! I get to just be me.... but being God's child, you kind of want to aim to be the best version of yourself that you can be right??? I'm not saying I succeed at that by the way, but it makes you want to try!!!*

*And finally, if God loves me like I'm his child God also loves everyone else, which I already knew, then that means everyone should be treating everyone else like their brothers and sisters right? And I would absolutely not ever see my brothers go hungry so.....*

**145 O Little town**

*John 1.1-14*

**162 In the bleak mid-winter**

Prayers of intercession

**Prayers**

O God we give you thanks for the coming of Jesus and the mystery of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

Grant us moments during this busy Christmas celebration to stop and wonder at what all this means to us.

Help us consider your involvement in our lives, our connection to you and each other and every part of your creation;

to know that we are loved and held, like a baby in her mother’s arms: a child of God.

So may light shine in our darkness. May our fears be overcome.

May that light lead us into greater life. May our words and deeds reflect your love to us.

Rather than words and deeds of hatred and envy dominating the world, Lord we pray for the power of love to bring understanding, reconciliation and peace. May there be enough for everyone.

As you came to earth, a hungry baby, so we ask you to come now by your Spirit and let the oppressed go free.

May we, this Christmas, share all we have with those around us to bring in a fairer world, where all may see their light rise in the darkness and their gloom turn to dancing and celebration.

We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

**147 Silent Night**

**NOTICES**

Reminder that refreshments are served at the end of the service. Retiring collection for Christina Aid as you leave.

If we didn’t sing your favourite carol many apologies. There are a couple more services that may give further opportunity. Christmas Eve at 5pm. Christmas day at 10am

Open Door Carol Service on Tuesday night at 7.30pm

Carol singing at the Quarry Chapel on Christmas Eve at 9.30pm.

In the new year we will hold our annual Alpha Course. Leaflets are on your seats. People have many questions and difficulties with the Christian faith. We have used the Alpha Course as a way to help have a conversation about faith today and whether you can believe, how to find God, how to be open to the spirit, how to find guidance, healing, hope. Please consider coming. Its open to anyone. If you come and decided its not for you – we wont pester you or send anyone round. Starts on Wednesday Jan 18th.

**Final Carol: Hark the Herald**

**Blessing**

**May God, who took flesh in Jesus, gather into one all things on earth and in heaven and enfold us in peace and goodwill.**

**The blessing of God, the Father Son and Holy Spirit**

**be with you this Christmas time and remain with you always. Amen**

1. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/interviews/pastor-mick-fleming-an-angel-told-me-to-forgive-the-man-who-abused-me/14318.article> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)