

Call to Worship

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." (Is 2:3)

Worship in song

Sing hymns and/or worship songs of your choice.

Reading from the Psalms

- Psalm 115:1-11

Prayer of confession

Dear Lord,

you have committed yourself to us in love and we worship you with gratitude.

We are a fallible, mixed bag of people, people of good conscience and bad; content and anxious, certain and uncertain, those who believe and those who half believe.

We stand before you in our differences each in need of your grace and forgiveness.

Forgive the sins we know and the sins we don't know the secret sins and the public sins; the careless sins and the careful sins; the whispering sins and the sins that shriek.

We hide nothing and ask for your forgiveness and renewal. Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

This is how God showed his love among us; He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 Jn 4:9-10)

Prayer of thanksgiving (based on Psalm 40)

God of grace and truth,

When we invented gods in our search for meaning, you came to us.

When our gods were aloof and did not care, you came to us.

When our invented gods wore a thousand different masks, you came to us.

When we disqualified ourselves from your presence by our sin, you came to us.

When we longed for a God we could see and touch, you came to us.

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When we longed for a God who would resolve injustice, you came to us.

When we longed for a God who would give us purpose, you came to us.

When we longed for a God who could love us, you came to us.

When we longed for a future that was already assured, you came to us.

Thank you so much that you are a God who comes to us and will not be without us.

Holy Communion

In the Jewish calendar, two major religious feasts were celebrated each year to acknowledge God's faithful provision for life. These festivals became times of harvest thanksgiving. The harvest of the first barley crop was celebrated at the feast of Passover and the harvest of the first wheat crop was celebrated at Pentecost.

However, both festivals originally celebrated the provision of life at a more spiritual level. The feast of Passover celebrated the time when the judgement of God passed harmlessly over the Hebrew people when the rest of the land was afflicted by plagues because the evil people had done. The second festival followed fifty days later. This was the feast of Pentecost which commemorated the Hebrew people arriving at Mt Sinai where they were given God's law, the commandments they were to live by which would ensure their survival.

Passover therefore represented God's judgement passing safely over people and Pentecost represented being told how to live rightly.

Both have direct parallels in the New Testament with Jesus dying at Passover, causing God's judgement to pass safely over people, followed by Pentecost, fifty days later, when God gave the church the gift of his Holy Spirit to empower our ministry and ensure the church lived rightly.

As we come together, at Jesus' request, to celebrate Holy Communion, we particularly do so to acknowledge the first of these two gifts, the gift of Jesus' death to pay the price for our sins so that we might have free access to God. The bread represents the body of Christ given to us that we might live ...and the wine represents the blood of Christ shed for us to pay the price for our sins. Lets' share both together.

The Bible Reading

- Micah 5:2

The Message: KNOW THE HOPE OF CHRISTMAS

I wonder whether the Magi, when they travelled across the Arabian Desert to see a small child in Bethlehem, saw what they hoped to see. After all, there wasn't much evidence then that this small child was a king, far less the Messiah. Only the miraculous provision of a guiding star indicated his special status.

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So, let me ask the question: What had you hoped to see in Jesus, that you've not found, and which has caused you to back away from him? Jesus says: *Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me* (Mt 11:6). Has Jesus not been what you'd hoped for?

There are usually two reasons for thinking this.

The first is because Jesus has not stopped bad things happening to you in life. As such, he is a failed good luck charm.

In order to think like this, you need to ignore the fact that God has won for you the right to live eternally in his complete and final kingdom in which there is no more injustice, or suffering.

You also need to ignore the fact that Jesus has paid the price for your sins on a cross. Surely no one can be so self-obsessed and so focused on the immediate, that you ignore the big picture God wants you to be in.

A second reason people can back away from Jesus is that it has taken God so long to show up in your life... and in your world. As the writer of Proverbs says: *'Hope deferred makes the heart grow sick'* (Prov 13:12).

If this is the case, it's worth remembering that time is not a problem to God. He stands outside of time. But can you trust God with history?

Picture what you would have thought if you lived in the time of the Maccabees and Hasmoneans (1st and 2nd century B.C.). It must have seemed that the Messiah was never going to come.

Let me read you an Old Testament prophecy about the coming of the messiah.

*I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a sceptre will rise out of Israel.* (Num 24:17)

That prophecy was written about 1,400BC! That's a lot of waiting for Jesus.

1,400 year ago from today, the Anglo Saxons were invading England in their longships and Islam had just been invented and its disciples were waging war in Arabia, North Africa and Europe. Imagine waiting for that length of time 'till today for something to happen?

*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.* (Micah 5:2)

This was written about 650 years BC! That's a lot of waiting! 650 years ago from today, was the medieval times. It was the time of the 100 years war between France and England. It was the time of the Lollards who were being persecuted to death for wanting the Bible to be written in English. Imagine waiting for that length of time until today for something to happen?

But let me read to you another prophecy from long ago... a truly remarkable one that should give you hope. It occurred in the time of the Persian Empire,

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and the prophecy was given to a Jewish man, Daniel, who had risen to become an important official during his exile to Babylon.

As Daniel is praying for his people and for Jerusalem, the angel Gabriel visits him and tells Daniel that God values him. Gabriel then tells Daniel that the time between the issuing a decree to rebuild Jerusalem and the coming of the Messiah will be 483 years. Here's the prophecy:

Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' (Dan 9:25-26)

It is most probable that the decree referred to by Daniel was that of Artaxerxes in 445 B.C. (Neh 2:1-6) as that one that specifically speaks of rebuilding the city of Jerusalem.

If the edict to rebuild Jerusalem was that of Artaxerxes in 445 B.C., this predicts that the Messiah (the "anointed one") will come as ruler in A.D. 38. If this is so, then this is a truly remarkable prophecy of Jesus'. He was hailed as "ruler" (Dan 9:25) on his entry to Jerusalem (Lk 19:37-38)... and then crucified, "cut off," (Dan 9:26) from the land of the living a week later, quite possibly in A.D. 38. (Lk 23:46).¹

This was written about 500 BC! Now, that's a lot of waiting!

500 years ago from today was the time of Copernicus, and Leonardo Da Vinci. It was when Spain and Portugal were plundering gold from South America. It was the time of Martin Luther's Reformation, Henry the Eighth, Queen Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots. Imagine waiting for that length of time until today for something to happen? That's a fair old lead-time, isn't it?

But why such long periods of time?

Because God writes his name *large* upon history. He's got something big, very big, in mind.

What was it?

It is the lead up to the story of God coming:

- to us,
- as us,
- for us?

God's plan is to draw closer and closer as he draws us back to himself, we who had been hijacked from him because of our sin. God comes inexorably closer and closer, drawn by love. He seeks us as a lover seeking his bride.

God shows:

- His business card in the order and vastness of the cosmos
- His personality through his prophets to whom he gives prophetic revelation
- His consistent character and plan through his word in scripture

¹ The phrase "cut off" referring to the death of the Messiah is used in the prophecy about Jesus found in Isaiah 53:8.

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- His presence with us in Jesus
- His presence within us through filling us with his Spirit

Will you say 'yes' to his lordship and purpose in your life this Christmas?

Prayers for others

Pray with passion for those things God has placed on your heart, remembering the persecuted church, world events, the sick and our leaders.

Benediction

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and every. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

Clean up!

Matthew 3:1-11

You will need:

- 1) lots of cleaning things, e.g. mops, brooms, brushes, a feather duster and a waste paper bin.
- 2) screwed up pieces of paper with HATRED, LYING, GREED, JEALOUSY, CRUELTY on them.

Ask the children what happens when someone important is coming to your house. Say something like:

"Do you clean the house up? ...then sit back casually as you welcome your guests as if your house was always this tidy? Has your place sometimes got rubbish around the place?"

(Throw the screwed up pieces of paper everywhere around the room.

"Just imagine if God were coming to stay. Would you clean the place up a bit? Well, let's clean this place up and make it ready for God."

Hand out the cleaning stuff and go around the room. (Take the feather duster yourself so you can dust some "antiques" in the room, e.g. an older colleague with a sense of humour). Exclaim loudly when you come across a piece of litter (ask the children to read it out loudly) then put it in the bin.

Then say to the children that Christmas is a time when we remember that God really did come to us. So, this Christmas, lets all make sure we clean away the rotten things we do, to make Jesus welcome in our hearts.

Read or paraphrase Matthew 3:1-11 and teach about John the Baptist, the person that God sent to tell people to get ready for the coming of Jesus the first time he came. John told people to prepare for God coming to them as Jesus by:

- 1) turning away from doing bad things (the sorts of things we tidied up and put in the bin). The word 'repent' means more than saying sorry. It means saying sorry AND turning around the way you live so you don't do the bad things any more. Repentance is a 'turn around' word.
- 2) showing people that we had cleaned ourselves of these bad things by being baptised (Mt 3:6).
- 3) showing evidence of living in a brand new way that would please God (Mt 3:8).

Ask the children whether a detective would find evidence of them being a Christian by looking at the way they behaved. Discuss what sort of evidence would he be looking for.

End with prayer in which everyone promises to living lives in such a way that would make God really happy so that we are ready for Jesus.