

A Service for Christmas Eve

In recent years there has been a marked increase, throughout the country, in the number of Christmas Eve services, at midnight.

The writer holds that the Midnight Carol Service should be something out of the ordinary. The darkened church itself heightens the atmosphere of mystery that surrounds Christmas Eve. It is a time of warmth and surprise, of expectation and adoration, which should be reflected in some way in the lively praises and the graceful ritual and ceremonial of the service. How else may we mark the Greatest Mystery of all time !

To those who maintain that such a service is nothing more than a stunt, it is, on the contrary, submitted that there is hereby offered an excellent evangelical opportunity. There will indeed be many in church on this occasion who are not there at any other time—some perhaps with no Church connection at all. On such a favourable and happy occasion the preacher must not fail, in the short and pointed address, to present the challenge of the coming and indwelling Christ.

The appended Form and Order of Service, which, it may be added, is in use in a country church, shows how the existing and traditional prayers for Christmas Eve may be set within the framework of a service that is different.

It is, of course, assumed that the Sunday before Christmas Day is observed as the Fourth Sunday in Advent, and *not* as "Christmas Sunday." The latter is a recent innovation and is quite alien to the age long practice of Christendom. It also makes nonsense of a Christmas Eve service ; for how can one eagerly wait for that which has already been celebrated on the previous Sunday ?

Form and Order of a

CHRISTMAS EVE MIDNIGHT SERVICE

The Church in darkness, save for the candles on the Holy Table and the lights on the Christmas Tree.

Entry of the Bible, the Choir, and the Minister.

Processional Hymn (unannounced)

“ Once in Royal David’s City ”

or

“ It came upon the midnight clear ”

Introduction

Two thousand years ago, men waited hopefully for the coming of the Saviour of the world. In the stillness this evening, try to catch something of that spirit of expectation, that we too, may wait for Christ.

Call to Prayer

It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.

Blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching.

The Lord hath said unto me : “ Thou art my Son ; this day have I begotten thee.”

Let us pray

Eternal God, our Heavenly Father, who hast caused light to shine out of darkness; shine now in our hearts, we beseech Thee, to give the light of the knowledge of Thy glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Blessed Saviour, by Thy divine humility and lowly state quicken in us meekness, wonder, and penitence.

Holy Spirit, help us now to worship with joy in the beauty of holiness.

And to Thee, O blessed Trinity, be glory, honour, and majesty, world without end.

O Lord our God, look in mercy upon us Thine unworthy children. Grant that we, being humbled by Thine infinite love, may freely confess our sins, and receive Thy gracious forgiveness. Make us to rejoice in the wondrous redemption from the power of sin and death, which by the holy incarnation of Thy Son our Saviour Thou dost seal unto us now and forever.

Most merciful God, for whose chosen handmaid and her Holy Babe there was no room in the inn at Bethlehem ; help us all by Thy Spirit to make more room for the Christ in our common days, that His peace and joy may fill our hearts, and His love flow through our lives to the blessing of others, for His name’s sake.

O God, who at this holy season dost bring delight unto Thy little ones by gifts, good cheer, and loving kindness of friends; grant that, as their hearts are gladdened to receive the bounty of our earthly love, they may come to know Thy divine love in Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

O God, who has made this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true light : grant we beseech Thee, that, as we have known the mysteries of this light on earth, so we may likewise come to the enjoyment of it in heaven ; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The Holy Scriptures.

Hear the Advent Word of the Prophet—
Isaiah 7 ; 10-14

Hear the Advent Word of the Apostle—
Titus 2 ; 11-14

Hymn or Carol

Intimations

The Proclamation of the Word

The Sermon

Ascription of Glory

Let us Pray

Almighty God, we pray for the peace of the whole world, and the salvation of all men, beseeching Thee to enlighten the darkness of the earth with the beams of that Sun which shall no more go down.

Remember, O Lord, our beloved country ; give us peace and prosperity, and establish us in righteousness.

Remember, O Lord, at this season of joy, all those who are in any kind of sorrow or distress, in particular any such known to ourselves, and help us in our gladness to remember the needs of others.

Remember, O Lord, the cold and hungry, and the oppressed ; the lonely and the unloved ; all those who know not the the Lord Jesus, or who love Him not, or who by sin have grieved His heart. Visit them with the dayspring from on high, to give light to them that sit in darkness and to guide their feet into the way of peace.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light, look favourably upon Thy whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; and by the tranquil operation of Thy perpetual Providence, carry out the work of man's salvation. Let the whole world feel and see that things which were cast down are being raised up, that those which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are returning to perfection; through Him from whom they took their origin even Jesus Christ Thy Son, our Lord, who with Thee O Father, and the Holy Spirit, is forever to be glorified and adored, world without end. *Amen.*

Hymn

“ Still the night.”

Directed meditation—followed by silence

It is now *one minute* to midnight.

In that minute let us try to enter into the spirit in which, long ago, men waited for the Saviour's birth. Let us think of God's goodness in sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to be born for our salvation.

(additional sentences, if required)

“ O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.”

Silence

MIDNIGHT

Ringing of the Christmas bell

All lights on

Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad before the Lord, for He cometh.

Jesus said: I am the light of the world: he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

Let all stand

The Holy Gospel—the Word Incarnate

Let us hear with reverence and joy the wondrous record of our Saviour's birth, written by Saint Luke.

St. Luke, 2; 1-14

Thanks be to Thee, O God, for this Thy glorious Gospel.

The Response in the Belief

Let us profess our Faith—" I believe in God"

The Offerings

Men of old greeted the Saviour's birth with gifts—gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Let us worship Christ with our offerings, the symbol of our loyalty and love.

Let us pray

The Thanksgiving

Lift up your hearts

We lift them up unto our Lord God

It is verily meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto Thee, O Holy Lord, Father Almighty, Everlasting God.

Especially at this time, we praise Thee, because Thou didst give Jesus Christ Thine only Son to be born for us of Mary, that through Him we might have power to become the sons of God. Thee, mighty God, heavenly King, we magnify and praise. With angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we worship and adore Thy glorious name ; evermore praising Thee, and saying :

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts,
Heaven and earth are full of Thy Glory :
Glory be to Thee, O Lord Most High.

Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.

Not as we ought, but as we are able, do we bless Thee for His holy incarnation, giving us light in our darkness, and bringing salvation to us and all mankind.

Grant us O God, such love and wonder, that with humble shepherds, wise men, and pilgrims unknown, we too may come and adore the Holy Babe of Bethlehem. With these our gifts we worship Him.

And we humbly beseech Thee to receive and bless this offering of our worship ; and to send upon us Thy Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, to bless and consecrate our bodies, minds, and spirits, that we may give ourselves to Thee, a living sacrifice ; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And as our Saviour Christ hath taught us, we humbly pray, and say,

Our Father *Amen.*

Adesti fidelis, laeti triumphantes.

Hymn

“ O come, all ye faithful ”

Benediction

The joy and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you, and all your loved ones, this Christmastide : and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be amongst you, and remain with you always. *Amen.*

Recessional Hymn (unannounced)

“ Hark ! the herald angels sing.”

NOTES.

The above service is timed to commence at 11.30 p.m.

The Sermon should occupy about 6 to 9 minutes.

As the Meditation should begin at least one, and not more than two minutes before midnight, regard should be paid to the length of the Sermon. The singing time of the Carol “ Still the Night ” is easily calculated, and further adjustment is therefore possible by lengthening or shortening the Intercessions, as required.

The Intimations may consist simply of a welcome to visitors and an invitation to join in the Christmas Services on Christmas Day, or on the following Sunday. The opportunity may also be taken of inviting all who are in communion with the Church Catholic to the celebration of the Christmas Communion.

The Processional Entry of the Bible, the Choir, and the Minister, and the Recessional of the Minister, the Elders bearing the Alms Dish, and the Choir, should be from, and to, the West or main door of the church, even although this procedure is not normally followed on Sundays.

Carols may be sung by the Choir in the main Vestibule from 11.15 p.m. as the congregation assembles.

The pulpit should be illuminated by a desk light only. It will be found helpful if instructions are previously given to the congregation to bring torches.

Where white Pulpit Falls and Markers are in use, they should be displayed at this service which marks the beginning of the Christmas season.

Note : Most of the devotional material included, by permission, in the foregoing service, is drawn from *Prayers for the Christian Year* (1952), and the *Book of Common Order* (1940), prepared for the use of Ministers by the Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion of the Church of Scotland, and published by the Oxford University Press, of which due acknowledgement is hereby made. Ed.