

A CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE

The following service was timed to begin at 11.15p.m. on Christmas Eve and end just after midnight on Christmas morning. It was prepared with a view to meeting the following criticisms of the hour-long Service of Nine Lessons and Carols held on previous years:

1. It's too long. Our voices get tired with so much singing, especially long carols like "The First Nowell".
2. It's too predictable. Year after year we have the same lessons with their formal introductions.
3. On the other hand, use of a modern translation like the Good News Bible robs people of the familiar Christmas words.
4. Having different people coming up to read the lessons distracts the congregation and breaks the continuity of the service.

The new service was led throughout by the Minister. Hymns were from the R.C.H., but C.H.3 equivalents are given, with modification when necessary. Of the Bible readings, 2 are from A.V., 1 each from R.S.V., G.N.B., and Phillips, and 6 from the N.I.V. (using the margin to retain such words as "seed" and "Wise men".)

THE SERVICE

Let us worship God.

Let's begin with a hymn that announces that our Saviour is coming.

Hymn 40, vv. 1,3,5,7 (CH3 160 vv. 1,2,3,5,).

"Hark the glad sound! the Saviour comes".

Brief Prayer, asking that God will make the Christmas message real to us through this Service, and that he will accept our praise and worship.

Old Testament Preparation.

For thousands of years there was no Christmas, but from the beginning the promise was there, and this promise was repeated again and again over the centuries.

Here is what God said to the serpent tempted by Eve:

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and hers; he will bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel."

One would be born, thousands of years later, who would crush the Devil, and deliver us from his power.

Eighteen hundred years before Jesus came God called Abraham, and later on made this promise to him:

"Because you have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and through your seed all nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me".

The one to be born would bring blessing to every nation of the world, and he would be a descendant of Abraham.

A thousand years before Jesus came God promised King David:

"I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, and I will establish his kingdom. Your throne shall be established for ever."

The one to be born would be of the kingly line of David, and his rule would last for ever.

Three hundred years later Isaiah the prophet spoke of the birth of the same King:

"Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgement and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this."

The one to be born would be the Mighty God, and would rule with justice. And Micah, who lived about the same time, foretold that the coming King would be born in Bethlehem, the City of David:

"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 days of eternity. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.

The one to be born had already been in existence from eternity. He would be like a shepherd to his people, and would bring them peace. But seven hundred years had still to pass before the first Christmas.

Let's sing a hymn that puts into words the way people longed for the Saviour to come.

Hymn 149, vv. 1,4,5 (CH3 165 vv. 1,4,5)

"O come, O come, Immanuel
And ransom captive Israel."

The Time Approaches.

Six months before the first Christmas, a boy called John was born, and his father Zacharias spoke about his calling;

"You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare a road for him, to tell his people that they will be saved by having their sins forgiven. Our God is merciful and tender.

He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us
and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow
of death,

to guide our steps into the path of peace".

At last the day came, and in the words of St Paul

"when the right time finally came God sent his own Son, born of

a human mother."

Here is how St Luke tells the story:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Let's sing about this.

Hymn 51, vv. 1,2,5,6 (CH3 179).

"See! in yonder manger low."

St Luke goes on to tell us what happened later that night.

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to the God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

"And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger."

The shepherds praised God. Let's join in their praise and wonder.

Hymn 49 (CH3 176).

"Still the night! Holy the night!"

It was not only Jews who welcomed the coming of our Saviour. Wise men came also from the east. Here is their story:

"After Jesus had been born in Bethlehem in Judea during the time of King Herod, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'

Herod called the religious leaders of the Jews and made enquiry; he was told of Micah's prophecy, and sent the Wise Men to Bethlehem to find out.

"After they heard the king, they went on their way to Bethlehem, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh."

Let's sing now about the Wise Men coming to Bethlehem.

Hymn 45, vv. 4-6 (CH3 173 vv. 4-6, or possibly 3-5).

"This star drew night to the north-west".

St. John thought much about the meaning of what happened when Jesus came to earth, and he put it into words in the first chapter of his Gospel:

"At the beginning God expressed himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God, and was God, and he existed with God from the beginning. All creation took place through him, and none took place without him.

"He came into the world - the world he had created - and the world failed to recognise him. He came into his own world, and his own people would not accept him. Yet wherever men did accept him he gave them the power to become sons of God. These were the men who truly believed in him.

"So the word of God became a human being and lived among us. We saw his glory (the glory like that of a father's only Son) full of grace and truth.

"It is true that no one has ever seen God at any time. Yet the divine and only Son, who lives in the closest intimacy with the Father, has made him known."

Charles Wesley put the meaning of what had happened into words in a hymn. Let's sing it.

Hymn 46 (CH3 169).

"Hark, the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born king".

BRIEF TALK (5 or 6 minutes) I took as my text John 10: 10b:

"I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."

PRAYER that our hearts might be open to receive the One who came into the world at Christmas, ending with:

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven,
No ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

"O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel."

Dedication of Offering.

Hymn 55 1st Version, vv. 1,3,4 (CH3 191, vv. 1,3,4.)

"O come, all ye faithful".

Benediction.

William G Young
Resolis and Urquhart

Dr Young has now retired from his charge.
We are grateful to him for his several contributions to 'The Record' , and wish him well for the years to come. His article 'Funerals in a Rural Parish' will appear in a forthcoming issue.

WGN

CAP THIS

When I was Minister of Ferryhill South, Aberdeen, Alma Hunter married William Wildgoose - presumagly after a wildgoose chase!

When Interim Moderator of Ruthieston South, Aberdeen, Agnes Perfect married John Saint.

G RENDLE LEATHEN