

Service with the Christmas story

From 1990 the Commission on Worship has each year provided service orders and resources for congregational worship without communion on Christmas Eve or another suitable time at or near Christmas. These services, released through the Board for Congregational Life and Openbook Publishers, have catered for the involvement of children and the possibility of visitors being present who perhaps seldom attend church. This service order is based on some of the more permanent features of these services.

NOTES

- 1 This order is offered as a model, to be adapted according to local requirements.
- 2 The presentation may be elaborated or simplified, and may involve children, adult readers, musical contributions, mime, lights, slides, sound effects, microphones, costumes, and props.
- 3 If an entrance procession is held, banners may be carried, as well as the cross. The pastor, narrators, readers, choir, and other participants may take part in the procession. The same group recess during the last carol.
- 4 The carols can vary, but should be familiar ones, if the whole congregation is to join in.
- 5 The opening verses, from Isaiah 9, are part of the appointed first reading for Christmas Eve. They may be treated in various ways, taken by different numbers of readers or even a voice choir. Other verse selections, eg Psalm 96, could be used instead.
- 6 The story of the first Christmas consists of Isaiah 40:3–5; 7:14; Luke 1:26–45; 1:46–55; 2:1–20, adapted slightly for dramatic presentation. The Song of Mary (here in the ELLC version) could be read by ‘Mary’, spoken in unison, spoken antiphonally by men and women or by ‘Mary’ and congregation, or sung in some form by congregation or choir (see canticles in appendix).

- 7 The congregation could sing the liturgical ‘Glory to God in the highest’ in some form as a response to the angels.
- 8 An offering may be received during the singing of the carol after the reading from Titus 2.
- 9 If an address is given, it should be short and direct, bearing in mind children and visitors. It may be supplemented or replaced by a dramatic presentation.
- 10 The Apostles’ Creed may be treated in various ways, eg spoken antiphonally. Silence, or a cymbal, bell, trumpet or drum, could highlight the incarnation statement ‘was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary’, and a light could focus on the manger scene or crib.
- 11 The prayer may be adapted. It could be spoken by various voices.

OUTLINE OF THE ORDER

PREPARATION

Processional carol
In the name
Opening verses
Carol
Prayer of Christmas Eve (collect)

STORY OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

Narrative: Isaiah prophesies
Carol
Narrative: Mary to bear a son
Song of Mary
Narrative: Jesus is born
Carol
Narrative: Angels appear to shepherds
Carol
Narrative: An army of angels appear
Carol
Narrative: Shepherds visit Jesus
Children’s recitation / carol

WORD OF GOD

Reading
Carol
Address / dramatic presentation

Apostles' Creed

PRAYERS

Prayer

Lord's Prayer

CONCLUSION

Blessing

Recessional carol

Service with the Christmas story

PREPARATION

PROCESSIONAL CAROL

eg O come, all ye faithful (LH 34, TAC 60)

IN THE NAME

Hallelujah! Christ is born for us. Come, let us worship him. Hallelujah!

In the name of the Father and of the Son **†** and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

OPENING VERSES

The people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light.

Reader(s):

They lived in a land of shadows,
but now light is shining on them.

You have given them great joy, Lord;
you have made them happy.

They rejoice in what you have done,
as people rejoice when they harvest grain
or when they divide captured wealth.

Minister:

The people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light.

Reader(s):

A child is born to us!

A son is given to us!

And he will be our ruler.

He will be called, ‘Wonderful Counsellor’, ‘Mighty God’,
‘Eternal Father’, ‘Prince of Peace’.

His royal power will continue to grow;
his kingdom will always be at peace.

Minister:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.

Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

CAROL

eg O little town of Bethlehem, verses 1–3 (LH 633, TAC 64)

PRAYER OF CHRISTMAS EVE (COLLECT)

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you have made this holy night shine with the true light of your Son. Grant that we who celebrate his coming to earth may finally come to full joy with him in heaven. We pray through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

STORY OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

NARRATIVE: ISAIAH PROPHESIES

Minister: Let's hear again the good news of great joy, see the baby lying in a manger, and rejoice in the wonderful things God has done.

Narrator: Long before Jesus was born, a prophet named Isaiah came with a message from God.

Isaiah: Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord! Clear the way in the desert for our God! Fill every valley; level every mountain. The hills will become a plain, and the rough country will be made flat. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it. The Lord himself has promised this.

The sovereign Lord is coming to rule with power, bringing with him the people he has rescued. He will take care of his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs together and

carry them in his arms; he will gently lead their mothers.
The Lord himself will give you a sign: A virgin will be with
child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel
(which means ‘God is with us’).

CAROL

eg the following verses (LH 632, TAC 70)

- 1 Once in royal David's city
stood a lowly cattle shed,
where a mother laid her baby
in a manger for his bed;
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child.**
- 2 He came down to earth from heaven
who is God and Lord of all,
and his shelter was a stable,
and his cradle was a stall;
with the poor, despised, and lowly
lived on earth our Saviour holy.**
- 3 And our eyes at last shall see him,
through his own redeeming love,
for that child so dear and gentle
is our Lord in heaven above;
and he leads his children on
to the place where he has gone.**

NARRATIVE: MARY TO BEAR A SON

Narrator: When the time had come, God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary.

(Mary is sitting. Gabriel appears.)

Gabriel: Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!

Mary (frightened): What do you mean?

Gabriel: Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, and he will be king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!

Mary: I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?

Gabriel: The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. There is nothing that God cannot do.

Mary: I am the Lord's servant; may it happen to me as you have said.

(Gabriel leaves.)

Narrator: Soon afterwards, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke to her.

(Elizabeth enters, and Mary moves across to her.)

Elizabeth: You are the most blessed of all women, and blessed is the child you will bear! How happy are you to believe that the Lord's message to you will come true!

Narrator: Then Mary praised the Lord.

SONG OF MARY

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,

my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

who has looked with favour on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed:

the Almighty has done great things for me

and holy is his name.

God has mercy on those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

The Lord has shown strength with his arm

and scattered the proud in their conceit,
casting down the mighty from their thrones
and lifting up the lowly.

God has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
to remember the promise of mercy,
the promise he made to our forebears,
to Abraham and his children for ever.

(Mary and Elizabeth leave.)

NARRATIVE: JESUS IS BORN

Narrator: At that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire. When this first census took place, Quirinius was the governor of Syria. All went to their own home towns to be registered.

(Mary and Joseph move slowly towards the manger.)

Narrator: Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the town of Bethlehem in Judea, the birthplace of King David. Joseph went there because he was a descendant of David. He went to register with Mary, who was promised in marriage to him. She was pregnant, and while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her baby. She gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger — there was no room for them to stay in the inn.

CAROL

Sung by children, eg What child is this? (LHS 746, TAC 90)

NARRATIVE: ANGELS APPEAR TO SHEPHERDS

(Shepherds enter on the other side.)

Narrator: There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night out in the open, taking care of their flocks. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory

of the Lord shone over them. They were terribly afraid, but the angel reassured them.

(Angel appears near the shepherds.)

Angel: Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Saviour was born — Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.

CAROL

eg the following verses (LH 23, TAC 25, alt)

- 1 From heaven above to earth I come.
I have good news for everyone.
This story that I come to bring
is wonderful, and makes me sing:**
- 2 To you this night a child is born,
a chosen virgin's little son.
This tiny helpless baby boy
will be your great delight and joy.**
- 3 This is the Christ, our God most high,
who hears your sad and troubled cry;
for he will be your Saviour here,
to set you free from sin and fear.**

NARRATIVE: AN ARMY OF ANGELS APPEAR

(Angel is joined by other angels.)

Narrator: Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the first angel, singing praises to God.

Angels: Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!

CAROL

eg the following verse (LH 33, TAC 34)

**Hark! the herald angels sing
glory to the newborn King;**

**peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled,
joyful, all you nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with the angelic host proclaim:
Christ is born in Bethlehem.
Hark! the herald angels sing
glory to the newborn King.**

NARRATIVE: SHEPHERDS VISIT JESUS

Narrator: The shepherds then said to one another:

Shepherd 1: Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the angel has told us.

Shepherd 2: Yes, let's go quickly and find the baby.

(Shepherds move towards the manger, and kneel in front of it.)

Narrator: So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and saw the baby lying in the manger. When the shepherds saw him, they told them what the angels had said about the child. All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said.

(Shepherds slowly move away. Mary and Joseph remain at the manger until after the Bible reading.)

CHILDREN'S RECITATION / CAROL

WORD OF GOD

READING

In his letter to Titus, chapter 2, the apostle Paul explains how the birth of Jesus changes us. He says:

God has revealed his grace to bring salvation to all people. That grace teaches us to say No to ungodly living and worldly desires, and to live in this world with self-control, integrity, and godliness. Meanwhile, we eagerly wait in hope for the blessing that will come when our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ appears in glory. He gave himself for us, to set us free from all lawlessness and to make for himself a people who are his very own, purified, and eager to do what is good.

CAROL

eg Silent night (LH 629, TAC 75)

ADDRESS / DRAMATIC PRESENTATION

APOSTLES' CREED

We have again heard the Christmas story, revealing to us the mystery of how our heavenly Father sent his Son into this world, to be born as a little baby for us and our salvation. Let us now confess our faith in this great and loving God.

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth.**

**And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried.
He descended into hell.**

**The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of God, the Father almighty,
from thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic* church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen**

*or: Christian; 'catholic' here means 'universal'

PRAVERS

PRAYER

We rejoice with Mary and Joseph, the angels, and the shepherds, at the birth of our Lord Jesus. Let us now ask him to help us.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

When the time was right, you came to earth as one of us.
Help those who wait for you to recognise your coming.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

You have come to live among us, full of grace and truth.
Live in our hearts, and show your grace to others through us.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

You have brought us pardon and peace with our heavenly Father.
Help us to please him by living at peace with each other.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

Your birth brought blessing to Mary and Joseph.
Bless our homes this Christmas, and make our families a blessing to
others.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

You gave up your riches in heaven, and were born among the poor here
on earth.
Show those who are poor your love through us.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

You are the Prince of Peace, and Lord of all.
Guide the nations of the world, and help them to work together for justice
and peace.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

You took on our human weakness.
Strengthen the weak, heal the sick, and comfort those who suffer.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

You have brought great joy to all people.
Gladden those who are sad, lonely, and depressed.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

Your birth brings us light and life.
Comfort the dying with the light of your presence, and lead them through
death to eternal life.

Lord Jesus, hear us.

As we travel on the journey to our heavenly home, let your light shine on us, so that we may see your glory and, together with the angels and all your people, praise our heavenly Father both now and forever,

Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done,
 on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
 as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

CONCLUSION

BLESSING

Christ the Son of God give you joy and peace by his presence with you; and the blessing of almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, † be with you always.

Amen.

RECESSIONAL CAROL

eg The first Nowell (LHS 744, TAC 84)