

# 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2023

## The paper-version Service



**To Begin:** Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe,

light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's Service.

**Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **Song:**

Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King;  
peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!"  
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with th'angelic hosts proclaim,  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King"

Christ, by highest heaven adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
late in time behold him come,  
offspring of the Virgin's womb:  
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
hail th'incarnate Deity,  
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,  
Jesus, our Immanuel.



The Good  
Shepherd  
Four Marks

Responding to God's Love

Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King"

Hail the heaven-born Prince of  
Peace!

Hail the Sun of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
risen with healing in his wings.  
Mild he lays his glory by,  
born that we no more may die,  
born to raise us from the earth,  
born to give us second birth.

Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King."

## The Sermon by Rob Hughes

### Read Ephesians 1.3-14 and John 1.10-18. God Makes New

What a beautiful, mystical, otherworldly Gospel reading, today. Thanks be to God.

What am I to say about 'God Makes New', Father, the title of this sermon? It can almost become an 'aphorism' - the kind of thing we say to one another with little thought, and maybe with even less understanding. Yet, though I do believe we are constantly undergoing 'renewal', I can I understand how it's not always easy to feel that way, to have trust in our faith - or even sometimes to remember we have it! And that's especially likely when the wrong that abounds in this world colours our attitude towards life in general ... injustice that comes - like 'deja vous' - again and again!

A couple of years ago I attended a lecture by "Jim" Al-Khalili, the eminent theoretical physicist. He said Newtonian physics and Quantum Mechanics come together in the human body at the molecular level. He told us how our body parts are constantly replaced - inside and out, constantly dying, constantly being replaced. And we learned that at the level of Quantum Mechanics it's perfectly possible, even likely, that bits of us will be in two or more places at the same time!

I will never again see multi-tasking' in the same way. I smiled inwardly at what I heard - proud to call our God 'My God', to acknowledge God's wisdom in Creation - yet at the same time I felt reduced, humbled, distanced by the unimaginably great scale of God's ingenuity!

But it's not science that brings me 'renewal': No, it's the powerful memory I have of first coming fully to faith back in 1990. I to church regularly before then, but never with the sense of closeness to God that came then - and remains whenever I am open to it.

There is no direct mention in this morning's readings that 'God makes new'. But we do find Jesus promising just that in Revelations 21:5, "Behold", he says, "I make all things new." What kind of new is this; mending the broken bits, patching up the occasional damage? No. He is saying: "I will return you to your essence". He is promising me and you, all of us, to dig-out the people we are from under the rubble of happenstance, to restore us to our primary meaning and purpose. And that's something nothing and no one can do without knowing why we were created - each one of us individually- in the first place. It is a miracle reserved by God, something beyond the reach of Newtonian physics and Quantum mechanics, the kind renewal that lifts the burden of anxiety, fear and resentment from our shoulders, the weight of cares under which the essence of who we are

lies hidden - even from our own eyes - the barrier that stands between us and our true nature as 'Children of God'.

This is renewal we *can* believe in - like faith itself - even when we are not really experiencing it. But the hope it restores to us is lost when a sense of separation from him takes hold of us, when troubles overcome our sense of his closeness.

Often, this year, I've been down-hearted. And I'm not ashamed to admit it; that's life! But I have been more aware in those moments of my distance from God. It's as though - flawed as I am - I have taken upon myself a weight of shame in the tragedies of life, the monstrous injustices that unfold across the world as I look on from my remote place. And when the sadness I see elsewhere combines with the troubles nearer to home - well ... it's harder to stay strong. I have never lost my faith, my belief in God; not for a moment. But, it's the closeness of our relationship with God that builds trust. Without it, where do I look for warmth, for the solace I need - for my sense of the new life awaiting me each morning?

I am remembering a conversation I had with my barber back in September, he a Muslim, me a Christian. I quoted Paul with more assurance than I truly felt in that moment, where Paul says: "It is when we first come to believe, that God's Spirit comes to dwell in us", (Ephesians 1:13-14). There was a deep silence as my friend stared with hard eyes at my reflection. 'But surely', he answered, 'this is God's world. We live in Him, He does not live in us!' That chastening observation emphasised that disconnection begins in *us* not in God. How we recognise Your presence in life affects the way we interpret what we see of the world.

So we mustn't let the shadows of this last year cast darkness on the year ahead. We must see the goodness in the lives around us. See it, too, in the goodness within us - waiting like seeds of grain to make the bread of life. Maybe it's trodden down goodness, maybe parched and dry, reaching out to take its place in our lives. To mix metaphors, we may feel wound-up, or even down, perhaps even abandoned like some ageing timepiece. But God is not a clockmaker. And we are not here to keep clockwork time.

In our reading from Paul, today, he likens us to possessions of God. It's the kind of insensitive and misleading translation that encourages fatalism - that we have no control, real agency or purchase on the tides of life. But, actually, the verb 'to possess' Paul uses here is a translation of the Greek word meaning 'to gain', or by extension, to benefit. Paul is telling us that the world 'gains', 'benefits', from our faith; that faith is itself a means of renewal in this broken world, 'tangible' evidence of Christ's restoring work

in us. Faith is a gift to us, the very embodiment of hope in Creation. Our lives are so much more important to each other - and to the whole world - than we can ever truly comprehend.

So, as you stand on the brink of a New Year, resolve to be yourself, to honour the life God makes of you and in you. Resolve to 'know' your true self. Ask God in prayer to help you seek it, recognise it, and reclaim it for his Kingdom. Remember your value in God's eyes. Remember the words of Psalm 8:5: ***'I have made you [just] a little lower than the angels and crowned [you] with glory and honour'.***

**HAPPY NEW YEAR.**

*The First Sunday of Christmas: Almighty God, who wonderfully created us in your own image and yet more wonderfully restored us through your Son Jesus Christ: grant that, as he came to share in our humanity, so we may share the life of his divinity; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

*The 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.*

**Blessing** to be declared over yourselves, The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

**The Notices:** We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am and 9.30am, and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is generally available the week after the service.

- Tea and Chat: Jan 17<sup>th</sup> at 2pm in the Church Hall.
- Tea and Bowls: Jan 17<sup>th</sup> at 2pm in the Church.
- Coffee and Questions: Jan 24<sup>th</sup> at 10.30am, in Church Hall.
- Tea and Praise: TBA.
- COGS Tots: 2<sup>nd</sup> Mondays.
- COGS Tinytots: Monday mornings.
- Messy Church: Second Sundays of the month.