



**Welcome to Blackburn Baptist Church, meeting at Bethesda Chapel once more, on Sunday December 13th 2020 at 10:45.**

For those not able to meet in person at present, we hope and pray that you will find this outline of our service helpful, as we all seek to worship God as a Church family, wherever we are.

We welcome those who are watching the recording either at our usual worship time of 10.45 or later. The service should be available to watch on Youtube. We also welcome those who are reading this at home.

Our service today, the third **Sunday in Advent**, is led by **Paul C. Alec**, our Pastor is at present still in Germany, so will watch the service from there, either from the livestream, or later if need be.

Our service begins with an unannounced song:

**O Come all you unfaithful**

O come, all you unfaithful.  
Come, weak and unstable.  
Come, know you are not alone.  
O come, barren and waiting ones,  
weary of praying, come  
see what your God has done.  
    Christ is born, Christ is born  
    Christ is born for you.

O come, bitter and broken,  
come with fears unspoken,  
come, taste of His perfect love.  
O come, guilty and hiding ones,  
there is no need to run,  
see what your God has done.  
    Christ is born, Christ is born  
    Christ is born for you.

(He's the Lamb who was given,  
slain for our pardon,  
His promise is peace  
for those who believe.  
He's the Lamb who was given,  
slain for our pardon,

His promise is peace  
for those who believe.)

So come, though you have nothing.  
Come, He is the offering.  
Come, see what your God has done.  
Christ is born, Christ is born  
Christ is born for you.  
Christ is born, Christ is born  
Christ is born for you.

Bob Kauflin, Lisa Chow,  
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<https://youtu.be/C-QHbpYjuig>

This is the link if you wish to watch, the video shows many different people either illustrating or responding to the words of the song.

**Paul then welcomes us all,**

He introduces the service and begins by sharing the story of our first Carol.

The first carol is written by Cecil Francis Alexander.

She wrote this in her “Hymns for little children” in a series intended to explain the articles of the Apostles Creed.

Born in Wicklow in 1818, the daughter of Major John Humphreys, a well-to-do landowner, in 1850 she married the Reverend William Alexander who became Bishop of Derry and in 1896, one year after her death, became Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland. Her “Hymns for little children” went into 100 additions and she devoted the profits to a school for deaf mutes in Londonderry. She published many books of poems, and her circle of friends included Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold. Tennyson thought her poem “The burial of Moses” one of the best in the language and wished he had written it himself.

The music was written by Henry John Gauntlet, who at the age of nine became organist at his fathers Church in Olney Buckinghamshire. He studied law and was articled to a solicitor, which profession he followed until 1844 when he devoted himself entirely to music, He is said to have written over 1000 hymn tunes and a large number of the best known tunes in most hymnbooks are his. The tune to the carol is called- Irby.

Do you know which carol this is? It tells the story of Jesus Christ from manger to seeing him at the right hand of God in heaven.

When the “Festival of nine lessons and carols” was first held in 1919 at Kings College Cambridge, this was chosen as the opening processional hymn and has been so used ever since.

Esther is singing it at Bethesda, accompanied by her Father Tim playing the piano!

Whilst those at the chapel are not able to sing with Esther, if you are at home you can sing as loudly as you like, even the descant!

## Once in Royal David's City.

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.

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 and mean and lowly  
lived on earth our Saviour holy.

And through all his wondrous childhood  
he would honour and obey,  
love and watch the gentle mother  
in whose tender arms he lay:  
Christian children all should be  
kind, obedient, good as he.

For he is our childhood's pattern:  
day by day like us he grew,  
he was little, weak and helpless,  
tears and smiles like us he knew;  
and he feels for all our sadness,  
and he shares in all our gladness.

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 is gone.

Not in that poor lowly stable  
with the oxen standing by,  
we shall see him, but in heaven,  
set at God's right hand on high;  
there his children gather round  
bright like stars, with glory crowned.

Paul leads us in our **Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer** :

'Lord God our Father, as we think of your first coming, we come today to give you thanks. It is a privilege to know you as our Lord and Saviour, to know that not only have you created all things but you come to this earth, as a human, in order to take our place on the cross and die for our sins, in order that we may have everlasting life. And that is why we can come with joy today, to acknowledge you as our Lord and Saviour, to acknowledge that you have done everything, created everything and are everything to all mankind. And we pray at this time and season of Christmas that you will not only be with us and help us recognise the greatest gift of all, that you will empower us by your Holy Spirit to lives that are worthy to be called your disciples, your ambassadors, your hands and feet, your voice in a world of darkness, where you bring light. So we thank you for being with us this morning, particularly as we say together the prayer that you taught your disciples, as a pattern for all our prayers.

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen.'**

**Paul now prepares to light the Third Candle** in our Advent Wreath:- representing God's love.

Ever present God, help me to remember your unending message that whatever else surrounds me, whatever is denied me and whatever is yet required of me, I am always encircled by your love Amen.

**Paul** now shares any **notices**:

He reminds us of the Zoom virtual coffee at 1pm today, that "Lancashire Sings" takes place on Thursday, from 7-8pm, and consequently our zoom prayer meeting will start at 8pm on Thursday. We are also running a Zoom quiz next Monday evening if anyone would like to "sign up" so that we can arrange teams.

We have a Christmas Greetings Page on our website if you wish to use it, and most importantly, our service at Bethesda next Sunday will be a Candle lit Carol Service at 4pm.

**Paul** now tells the story of our **next carol**:(at least he'd intended to, but skipped most of it at Bethesda, so here is what he would have said)

'It was written by Charles Wesley 1707-88

He was born in Epworth, educated in Westminster and Christ Church Oxford, where he later became tutor. He joined the Oxford Methodists and was ordained in 1735. He was said to be the poet of the evangelical revival. In the early days of Methodism, in spite of the opposition and dangers, Charles and his brother John were energetic and effective in outdoor preaching. Charles' hymns are said to number 6500, he was also organist at the parish church at Stockton-on-tees for nearly 35yrs.

Perhaps it's not easy to guess from 6500 hymns which carol I have chosen, until I tell you the music is adapted from a Mendelssohn chorus by W H Cummings, the then organist at Waltham Abbey.

Yes, when I said Mendelssohn I mean 'the Mendelssohn', Jacob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdi (a great name to trip off the tongue) he was a concert pianist at the age of ten and a composer at eleven, he was only seventeen when he composed his Midsummer Nights Dream Overture. He became Director of Music in the city of Dusseldorf in 1833, the King of Prussia invited him to become the Royal Kapellmister in Berlin- sadly died suddenly at the age of thirty eight.

The words to the carol come from Luke ch2 v1-20 (Judy will read v8-15), do you know what the carol is? I am sure Alec our pastor presently joining with us from Germany by livestream (M's home territory) will know what the carol is before I say!!!!'

The version to be shown at Bethesda was going to be one sung by Kristyn Getty, and rather than a traditional organ accompaniment, it has an Irish lilt, played with fiddles, pipes and drums! It even has Irish dancing at the end, but unfortunately we are not licensed to stream it, so here is a traditional version.

**Judith now reads Luke 2, 8-15, she has recorded this at home**

'And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth, peace to those on whom his favour rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

### **Hark the Herald Angels Sing**

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 the angelic host 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 a Virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,  
Hail the incarnate Deity,  
pleased as man with man to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail the Son of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings,  
risen with healing in His wings.  
Mild He lays His glory by,  
born that man no more may die,  
born to raise the sons of earth,  
born to give them second birth.  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Charles Wesley Recorded at NBA Big Sing and used by permission, CCL no 5664

<https://youtu.be/S34DwusAZB0>

**We are now being transported to those fields above Bethlehem, to eavesdrop on the shepherds.** - telling the story in a different way.

Shepherd 1: Wow! That was something else!

Shepherd 2: There must have been hundreds of them,

Shepherd 3: Thousands I reckon.

Shepherd 1: And those harmonies; it was as though heaven itself had been set to music.

Shepherd 3: That's what it was - (gazing upwards with awe - as if announcing . . .) the music of heaven

Shepherd 2: And . . . the message of heaven - Glory to God in the highest; peace to all the earth.

Shepherd 1: What an unbelievable privilege - of all the people on earth, God chose us to be the first ones to find out about the Messiah's birth.

Shepherd 3: This is going to be a night that I'll be telling my grandchildren about one day.

Shepherd 2: Yeah - this is our moment in history

(There is a brief pause as all three simply revel in the contentment of the moment)

Shepherd 1: Right - are we off then? (as if making to leave)

Shepherd 2: Off where?

Shepherd 1: Off to see the baby of course! (still making as if to leave)

Shepherd 3: What baby?

Shepherd 1: The baby the angels came to tell us about (with some impatience) - the "to you in David's town this day is born of David's line" baby they were all singing about. (still convinced that the other two will follow)

Shepherd 2: But they didn't tell us we had to go and visit him.

Shepherd 1: Yes they did

Shepherd 3: Well technically they didn't - they did say that we would find him wrapped in swaddling bands lying in a manger - but they didn't actually tell us to go and see him.

Shepherd 2: If you ask me these sheep have had enough disturbance tonight without us three clearing off and leaving them to their own devices. It's important that someone goes to see the baby, but we've got responsibilities. We need to be practical about this - we've got sheep to look after, there's plenty of other people who can go and visit the baby.

Shepherd 3: Quite right - so let's settle down and get back to sleep - (lying down and pulling a blanket around himself) it's your watch if I 'm not mistaken - good of you to wake us up though, wouldn't have wanted to miss it for the world . . brilliant show.

Shepherd 2: Absolutely - it was amazing; (settling down as well) let us know if any more angels come won't you.

Shepherd 1: You're acting as if you don't believe them - they've told us that the Messiah has been born. (the shepherd settles again for a longer conversation)

Shepherd 2: Of course we believe them, why wouldn't we? They are angels after all.

Shepherd 3: And there was certainly enough of them, you're not going to argue with that lot - so let's have no more talk of doubting their word and let's get back to sleep.

Shepherd 1: But we can't just do nothing.

Shepherd 2: We are not doing nothing - like you said, we are affirming our belief in the truth that the Messiah has been born.

Shepherd 3: And renewed and encouraged by that truth, we can all get on with our lives.

Shepherd 2: Our nation has been waiting years for this moment, and we can be grateful that we know for sure that it has finally come.

Shepherd 3: Amen!

Shepherd 1: But shouldn't we at least go and see him?

Shepherd 2: Feels a bit rude to be honest

Shepherd 1: What feels rude?

Shepherd 2: Checking up on the angels like that - I mean if they've come to tell us that a baby has been born, we should just take them at their word, not go snooping round making sure they've got it right - it wouldn't do to question the word of an angel.

Shepherd 3: Quite right - and besides, last thing a baby wants is a bunch of blokes turning up disturbing his little sleep.

Shepherd 2: Yeah, poor little fella's got enough to cope with having to kip in a manger.

Shepherd 1: Well shouldn't we at least tell someone.

Shepherd 2: Listen, let's not start causing bother for them

Shepherd 1: What do you mean bother?

Shepherd 2: If people start finding out that the Messiah's parents haven't even bought him a proper crib, there'll be a right to-do - you could have the press turning up, all kinds of officialdom . . .

Shepherd 3: Yeah, (interrupting Shepherd 2) and then all those religious weirdo's will want a piece of the action, which is bound to upset the orthodox brigade - then you'll have the Romans sticking their oar in and before you know it the poor family will be in a right pickle.

Shepherd 2: Live and let live, that's what I say.

Shepherd 1: But we have been entrusted with sharing the *Good News*; we have been given the job of telling the rest of humanity that its Saviour is born.

Shepherd 3: Don't you think you're missing something?

Shepherd 1: What on earth are you taking about now?

Shepherd 3: Well in case you have forgotten, we have just been visited by a multitude of the heavenly host - we have just been witnesses to the most amazing supernatural phenomenon that there's been seen since Moses parted the Red Sea.

Shepherd 1: But that's my point

Shepherd 3: And don't you think that if the aforementioned heavenly host needs anyone else to know about this, they are perfectly capable of telling them without our help.

Shepherd 2: He's got a point there

Shepherd 3: And besides, if we did start telling people, whose going to believe us?

Shepherd 1: But we have to tell people . . . we have to go and see this for ourselves and we have to tell the world.

Shepherd 2: And who's going to look after these sheep while we are out there on this vast publicity campaign - the Angels?

Shepherd 1: But didn't you hear what they said - good news to all of humanity, this is a story that is going to echo around the world for the rest of time - we've got to be the start of that. Would you seriously expect someone to discover the source of salvation and then not want to tell the world about it?

Shepherd 3: No - that would be ridiculous.

Shepherd 2: Yeah - ridiculous, now shut up and let me get some sleep.

SCENE ENDS with shepherds 2&3 settled down for the night and Shepherd 1 still sitting up with a fair measure of disbelief at the attitude of the other two.

**Our thanks to Michael, Hayley and Abbie for that recording, and NWBA for the script.**

**At Bethesda, we are now sharing a video message from Brian and Jackie Chilvers, our link BMS Missionaries who are preparing to travel to Chad, to work in the hospital there called Guinebor 11.**

**We come now to our Prayers of Intercession, led by Brenda, recorded at home.**

"Our Heavenly Father, as we bring our prayers to You once more, we thank and praise You for the many things that you have given us and we offer our grateful thanks for Your love and guidance and the hope you give us as we move through these difficult times.

We thank You that again, this morning, we are united, whether in our building or on live streaming, which later can be shared in a recording and by post. We offer our grateful thanks to You for the many people who have worked so hard in different ways during the past months to bring our services or the scripts to us each week.

Lord God, at the moment, there is much that worries us all. We pray for the leaders of our country and others with responsibility, as they face the challenge of what to do for the best to keep us safe, but get back to more normality again. Lord, as some of us plan to mix with others at Christmas, please give us Your help and guidance to do this with care. We ask that you will please put a restraining hand on

all and help us to think of others. We pray that the new vaccination will be successful and thank you for this hopeful beginning. As doctors and scientists continue to look for new ways to treat coronavirus, may they turn to You for help and give You their trust.

Father God, the needs of the world are on our minds, remembering many who find it difficult to isolate as they live so close to each other, and there is still war and persecution. We pray for countries with little health provision and where millions are hungry and have no help at all, as well as places where there are still many cases and new infections. Most countries are affected and Lord we can only ask that by sharing news, facts and science, all of us can get through to better things.

We ask for Your presence with those who are mourning the loss of loved ones especially in difficult circumstances. Also, Almighty God, we ask You to be near to those who are still sick with Covid-19 and those needing ventilators and intensive care and we also give thanks for the ones now recovering. We pray for care workers and those on the front line in hospitals and many other places, and we ask for their protection and the strength to go on.

There are people who, even though they are well, have problems. Many have lost their income and businesses and have families to support and we thank You that the government has helped in many instances. Father, we pray that nobody will be overlooked and all may have food and shelter in these times of restrictions and lockdowns. We ask for an upturn in the economy throughout the world and minimum upheaval as Brexit becomes a reality. We remember all on both sides of the channel who have been working on this.

Heavenly Father, we continue to bring to You those who live alone, and we ask for Your presence with each one for support and comfort, and we also remember those in care homes, especially where the people are known to us.

Also Father we pray that children and students may get the best education possible at this time and keep safe, and we ask that your help and strength be given to all teachers and those working in schools.

Many of us have personal worries, illnesses and difficulties Lord, and problems which may have to wait to be dealt with, like cancelled or delayed treatment or operations and we may have people in hospital or care homes we cannot visit. We pray that the NHS will be able to cope with all the added pressures at this time. We ask for Your presence with and healing for those of our fellowship who are ill, especially any in hospital, waiting for appointments or results and who are really struggling just now. We thank You for our Pastor who is there whenever we need him, and for the Deacons alongside him, working in the background and doing so much to keep us together. We ask that they will all be assured of your presence and be kept in Your loving care.

We pray, O Lord, for Christian leaders throughout the world, asking for strong leadership and wisdom at this time of great challenge. Also we bring before You the work of the BMS - remembering Brian and Jackie, our Link Missionaries - and also other charities and mission workers as they seek to do their best for You. Many people throughout the world have turned away from You, but please help all Christians to continue to find a way to show the Light of your love, especially this

Christmastime, and tell of the promises of Jesus Christ, whenever and wherever we can. We continue to pray for an end to this pandemic, and as time goes on, ask that You lead our church in new ways to reach out to the soon growing numbers in the community around us.

Lord, we ask You for so much, as there are many needs, but we now say sorry for all our wrong doing and forgetfulness and ask for your forgiveness, in the Name of Jesus Christ Your Son.

We bring all this to You in His name and we now offer all our prayers to You, O God our Heavenly Father. Amen"

**Paul now shares his message for today: The Tree.**

I love all things Christmas, I love Christmas trees, I love parcels, I love the songs and carols, I love the time of the year.

I want to talk a little bit about the Christmas tree. It's been said that the tree that you put up in your home says a lot about you, and everybody has their own tree, whether it's artificial or it's traditional or whatever ornaments they have.

For instance if you only put white lights up on your Christmas tree you're the kind of person that asked your house gets to remove their shoes,

if you put multi coloured lights on your tree you are an extrovert,

flashing lights shows that you have attention deficit disorder,

if you have home-made ornaments on your tree you have lots of children,

if you have a Yellow star on top of the tree you're a traditionalist,

if you cut off top of your tree it means you didn't measure the tree and you are vague.

If there is an evergreen smell in your house it means you bought a healthy tree and if it is a just a plain smelly tree, there is probably a dead bird in your tree somewhere.

One of the most cherished traditions is a Christmas tree; for most it goes up about a month before Christmas, some of us don't normally do it till very late but it's one of the most cherished iconic traditions of the season. This is the first year we have bought and decorated the tree before my birthday, in order to bring everyone a bit of cheer and expectation early in these challenging times.

About 8 million Christmas trees are sold in our country each year.

**But here's a question,**- What does a Christmas tree have to do with a saviour who is born, what does a Pine tree or a Fir tree have to do with the baby born in a stable 2000 years ago? Some would say absolutely nothing, Christmas trees are pagan in origin, Christians really shouldn't have them. In fact did you know that in the 17th century Christmas was forbidden to be celebrated by the Puritans, they believed Christmas shouldn't be a time of joy and frivolity, but a time of seriousness.

I think rather than getting Santa claustrophobic about it all, rather we should use the Christmas tree to look ahead because it points, and it should point, to another tree. If we

look at where did the Christmas tree originate, what does the tree demonstrate, and finally how should believers celebrate.

Firstly the origin - some point to Jeremiah chapter 10 (read v1-4). Some have said that is a picture in the Bible of a pagan celebration of the Christmas tree, but as this was written about 620 BC Christmas wouldn't even be around for another six centuries so it can't be a Christmas tree. What the prophet is speaking about is not somebody putting a Christmas tree and putting ornaments on it but rather taking a tree out of the forest and fashioning an idol out of it, and then placing that on a stand so it's immovable so that it can be wrongly worshipped. This passage is about idol worship.

Probably the first celebration of what we would look at as a Christmas tree comes in the Middle Ages. During that time in Germany there was a celebration every year in German homes and they had a little tree, they called it a Paradise tree. What they were celebrating, every year on December 24th was the feast of Adam and Eve; they placed all apples on that Fir-tree as the symbol of the garden of Eden and the fall of mankind in the garden. then eventually they would put wafers on the tree to symbolise the communion bread that was taken when Jesus said: 'This is my body' broken to redeem the sin the apple represented. That paradise tree was sort of like the first Christmas tree but it was celebrating the feast of Adam and Eve.

In the 1500s the story goes that the great reformer Martin Luther, while walking through the forest, saw the stars. It was as if the stars were bejewelled ornaments on the Fir-trees and he had an idea, he cut down a tree and brought it into the house. The story goes he put candles on the tree and told the children who saw this, 'this speaks of Jesus who penetrated the darkness of this world and came to set man free,' and that was really the first Christmas tree in Germany. It was another 300 years before what we see as the standard Christmas tree came into vogue, when Queen Victoria and Prince Albert encouraged the people of England to put little gifts, sweets and little glass blown ornaments on the trees, and gave gifts. It became more popular and was passed down to us today. That is where the tree originated

### **Second Question is what does the tree demonstrate?**

When you look at a Christmas tree typically people notice how pretty is, but then they notice the gifts under the tree, and that's because the tree demonstrates the spirit of giving that was what the Paradise tree was all about, and the first Christmas tree by Martin Luther 'that God gave his son the Lord Jesus Christ as the worlds greatest gift'. as Paul said in 2 Corinthians v9 'thanks be to God for his indescribable gift'. So the presents under the tree even more than the tree itself speak of the spirit of giving - 'for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son'.

So every Christmas we give gifts, we wrap them, and we put them under the tree. We hope that the person who receives the gift will love the gift that is selected, but it should be speaking of the greatest gift that was given.

Can I just say for the record, and all the statistics will prove me right, women do a better job at shopping for gifts than men do. Number one, women buy more gifts

than men; number two, they spend more time considering the right gift to buy other people than men; number three, they are far more successful at finding the right gift that they have thought long and hard about to get for other people, and number four, of gifts that women give, far less are returned. In fact 10% of the gifts that are given by women are returned and 16% of the gifts given by men are returned.

Giving gifts at Christmas time goes way back, some want to say the origin of that was the wisemen who gave gifts to the infant Jesus, gold frankincense and myrrh, that's a good try but that's not really about giving gifts at Christmas. In the third or fourth century in what is now modern day Turkey there was a pastor, preacher and bishop called Nicholas. He was known as someone who was very compassionate; he cared for the poor, if there were couples getting married and the poor bride couldn't afford a dowry he would make sure the money was collected and given to those poor brides so they could have a good wedding ceremony. He often found poor children and he would give gifts to them in the name of Lord Jesus Christ. When he died, on his feast day, which happened to be December 6th people started giving gifts to one another because Nicholas had done that before them, so that is the tradition that got passed on in time. When that tradition came to Europe he had white fur and a red cape to emulate the bishops robe. The Dutch called him 'Sint Nicholas' and then they contracted it to 'Sinter Cholas' which is where we get our name Santa Claus.

We have seen where the tree originated from, and seen what the tree demonstrates, the **third question I want to ask is how should believers celebrate?** I think we need to do this, we need to look at the Christmas tree, understand its meaning and it's origin, let it speak to us of Gods love, and let it point us to Gods Christmas tree, which is the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is always the focal point when it comes to God, that is the focal point of history, the cross of Christ is our tree of life. The only colour on this tree is red, from the blood that his son shed for our sins to redeem us back to God, it doesn't have many branches, just two, one extending to the right, one extending to the left, where the Saviour hung and embraced the whole world, those who would come. This year we have longed to embrace each other with a hug but have been prevented by Covid rules for our protection. Today nothing prevents Jesus' embrace for our protection. Although this tree it is not covered in white snow Jesus' sacrifice can make our souls whiter than snow, so the best Christmas gift isn't really under the tree ,it's the gift upon the tree, and that is the Saviour that was given for us. In the Bible, several times when the author speak of the cross of Christ, they refer to it as the tree that he died on. So for example In the book of Acts chapter 13 verse 29 it says 'when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in the tomb'. and then and then in Acts chapter 5 verse 30 it says 'the God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging him on a tree'. and then 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 24 says 'he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.'

When you think about it, all of human history is about three trees, the tree of knowledge, the tree of life, the cross of Christ. If you open up your bibles, not now, but if you and when you do, read the first couple of chapters of the bible in Genesis.

You discover there is a tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden, and the tree of life. God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they disobeyed. God banished them from the garden lest they eat of the tree of life and live forever in their fallen state.

But when you read the very end of the Bible, we again see the tree of life appear in the new Jerusalem, this garden like environment, there is a tree in the middle, it's the tree of life, it's there for the healing of the nations. So the Bible opens with a tree of the knowledge of good and evil and closes with the tree of life that is restored to mankind, and in between those two trees is the cross. It's the one tree that enables people to get to that final tree, the tree of life and live forever, so when we come to the manger on Christmas and we see the baby, we see a strange shadow of a cross over the child, because that little baby was born for one reason. Unlike all people who are created for living, the purpose for this child being born was death, because the angel said you will call his name Jesus, because the angel said he will save his people from their sins. His mission and purpose was to go to the cross and pay the price to live the perfect life we could never live, and even to die in our place so that the cross becomes the tree of life, it is God's Christmas tree.

Romans chapter 5 v 9 said God demonstrated his own love for us, in while we were stillsinners Christ died for us: that's the heart of the gospel and that's the heart of Christmas.

There is a policeman patrolling a city in England. One night he heard the cries of a child, it was a little boy who had been lost and didn't know how to get back home. He was just sitting down on the side of the road crying, and the policeman said: "Well I'll take you home, where do you live?" "I don't remember where I live, I don't know where I live, please take me home," so the policeman named several streets to see if the child would remember, but "I don't know the name of my street none of those sound right". So the policeman started thinking of shops and landmarks in the city but the child was beside himself and couldn't remember a thing, Finally the policeman looked up and could see across town, in the centre of town was a landmark church, a very famous church with a light white cross on top of the spire.

He said "Do you live anywhere near 'that'?" The face of the young child brightened, he recognised it, "yes" he said, "take me to the cross and I can find my way home from there." It is also true for your life, if you come to the cross you will find your way home from the place where God forgives, your home at the place where God receives you, just as you are, and washes your sin away. The best gift ever given was given by God to you, his son on a cross, on a tree, and all he wants from you is you, is your life.

**The final Carol this morning is: In the bleak midwinter.**

**(Paul had planned to finish with Go, tell it on the mountain, but again, we are not able to show that because of licensing restrictions)**

Whilst this is probably a familiar carol for most of us, it is sung here by Kristyn Getty, with an introduction by Alistair Begg, reflecting on how Simeon might have

felt when he finally saw the infant Christ. There are some additional words which on this recording are sung to Dvorak's New World melody - so you have both Holst and Dvorak in the same carol!

In the bleak mid-winter  
frosty wind made moan,  
earth stood hard as iron,  
water like a stone;  
snow had fallen, snow on snow,  
snow on snow,  
In the bleak mid-winter  
long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him  
nor earth sustain;  
heaven and earth shall flee away  
when He comes to reign:  
in the bleak mid-winter  
A stable-place sufficed,  
the Lord God Almighty,  
Jesus Christ.

(Gloria, gloria, now my eyes have seen  
Soli Deo gloria, he salvation brings!  
As the Lord has promised, I will go in peace.)

(Angels and archangels  
may have gathered there,  
cherubim and seraphim  
thronged the air,  
but only His mother  
in her maiden bliss,  
worshipped the Beloved  
with a kiss.)

What can I give Him,  
poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd  
I would bring a lamb,  
If I were a wise man  
I would do my part,  
yet what I can I give Him,  
give my heart.

Gloria, gloria, now my eyes have seen,  
Soli Deo gloria, he salvation brings!  
As the Lord has promised, I will go in peace.

In the bleak mid winter, I may go in peace,  
as the Lord has promised, I will go in peace.

Christina Rossetti Additional words Keith and Kristyn Getty Music Holst and Dvorak  
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<https://youtu.be/nwSV-b9vAUQ>

We are grateful to Getty Music for allowing us to play their recordings at present.

**Finally Paul** brings our worship to a close as we say a **Blessing together:**

May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make his face to shine upon you  
and be gracious to you, may the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and  
give you his peace, Amen.