



Come Holy Spirit of God and fill our hearts with the love of the Christ-child and the flame of your spirit. Amen.

This year, the skies of Bethlehem are full of fear rather than angels and glory.

Ukraine hears the wails of the sirens. Sudan and South Sudan ring with warning and terror. Around the world, we are beset with violence.

The skies that rang with the angels on that first Christmas also heard the cries of despair, pain and suffering.

What is God's answer? The cries of a newborn. Far below wing-born angels, wondering shepherds, wandering magi, lies a child.

Today a crying child is in a manger somewhere in the world, nobody willing or able to help his parents, or her parents, who so desperately need shelter. Or perhaps lying in an incubator, in a hospital low on electricity, like the Anglican Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza, surrounded by suffering and death.

Maybe the newborn lies in a house that still bears the marks of the horrors of October the 7th, with family members killed, and a mother who counted her life as lost. Or maybe they're not a newborn, but someone thinking of next term, having again to hide their Jewishness on their way to school in this country, or a playgroup in our own cities, fearful of the age-old atrocious sin of antisemitism.

When we look at the news, when we read, do we say to ourselves, is the Christmas story a wonderful dream, an beautiful illusion? Or is it in fact God's sovereign plan and purpose: is it a reality to be lived now, daily, in our experience?

Like an inconspicuous signpost overgrown by the verges of a country road, so easily missed, ignored, untrusted, that child of Bethlehem 2000 years ago points to a different way for each of us and for our world.

Such was that child's impact that 2,000 years later, in our culture it seemed natural and right for a King in royal robes to answer a child, "I come not to be served, but to serve" – and we know that that is the right way to be a King. From Joseph in Egypt to Jesus in Bethlehem, to Charles at Westminster Abbey, great leadership is seen in serving, not being served; in self-emptying, not seeking power.

In serving, not in being served, we resolve the problems of climate, the threats and realities of war, the malevolence of terrorism, the injustice of economic inequality, antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism, whatever else is dissolved in the sweet scent of those who serve.

Jesus Christ challenges a power and wealth obsessed world, where strength is always met by other strength, red in tooth and claw. The baby's cry is God's voice saying that there is another way. "Seek to serve, not to be served". The dream that we see in this Christmas story is a reality that outflanks both the power and the wisdom of our world. It is more powerful, more enduring, more real. Its price is faith and trust in Jesus Christ, the Christ-child, the baby.

Earlier this year, I visited a borough in Philadelphia called Kensington. It is one of the most deprived places in the United States. People are huddled over on the street from the effects of drug abuse, three or four deep by the edge of the pavement, shooting up. Children walk to school past the bodies of those who have died. Violence and crime are rampant.

A man called Pastor Shane Claiborne lives there. He leads a church called the Community of the Simple Way. And one of the things they do in a big bin outside their front door, is take in guns. They melt them down, and they turn them into household implements, or crosses. One of those cross is what I'm wearing today. It was an automatic rifle, a weapon of violence, of fear, of death, and it is transformed - into a sign of hope and life. They also transform derelict buildings into homes. Through their service they transform broken lives into restored dignity. Today, as we sit here.

That transformation begins in the chaos of a drug ridden; gun violence beset inner city. To unseeing eyes, the lowest part of a great city. The revelation of the birth of Jesus is made to shepherds, the lowest of Israel. Good shepherds guarded and preserved their sheep, were serving not being served. Bad shepherds were those who expected to be served not to serve. The Magi, the Kings, they were from far away, outside the people of God, the outsiders who came to worship because they found the God who sought to serve not to be served.

Today in Philadelphia, Canterbury, in Kyiv, even in Gaza, God himself breaks into our world and shatters the chains of violence, pride and ambition that hold us prisoner. He shows us a different kind of victory because he meets our violence with his vulnerability. He confronts our cruelty with his compassion. He responds to our selfishness with service.

When the angels return to heaven, Jesus stays with us. When Jesus ascends, he creates the church, full of the Holy Spirit of God, to be Jesus to today's world. God shows us a role to play in his story, and that role is to serve, not to be served.

This is God's answer to the questions about his power - a helpless baby in a country in war. It makes no sense to us. The story of the first Christmas is a scandal: God, the creator of the universe, entered his creation as a child. In our world power looks like dominance. We feel that what has been will always be. Hope is fleeting and only for the privileged few. The baby's cry offers us an alternative vision: the invitation into that vision is from God himself to us. The choice as to what we do with that invitation is for us to take. Our decision matters, accepting that invitation opens the floodgates of transformation.

It is the transformation that will come in the power of God from living under skies wracked by our weeping, to skies lit up by the joyful heavenly chorus.

So today, we must, as God's people around the world, as in that text from the church leaders and patriarchs in Jerusalem, printed out for you in the service sheet, gathered as one in a way that they have not been for half a millennium or more, sitting as one, shoulder to shoulder in these

times, we must join with them in appealing to Prime Ministers and Presidents, to tyrants and despots, to warriors and warlords around the world, to leaders in every place at every level, to families, to mayors, to MPs, to every individual.

Our appeal is simply this. Change. Be transformed. It is within your gift. For that child will return as our judge and their judge, the leaders judge. And the test of that judgement will not be ability or success, or fame or names on boards of past Archbishops, or fortune, however great. But that test will be a question. Do you, do we, do leaders, let this God who made Himself child become our model, our leader, our power, our form of transformation? Will that cry be heard? Not from here. Not by itself, it will be carried away in the howling hurricanes of suffering and cruelty, of pride and domination that is the world's model of leadership.

Will it be heard in 2024, as we have more people involved in democratic elections than in any year in human history. Not by itself.

The world favours the rich, successful and powerful – because of the lie, the great lie that in those things we will find fulfilment and eternal life. But our cry, the cry of the people who pray to God will be heard through the work of the Spirit. And as we pray today we trust that God. For God shows that true fulfilment, eternal life, purpose in this world is found in serving not being served. It is the promise of Kings at their coronation, of priests and bishops when they are consecrated, of the armed forces and the police. Serving is the practice of good families and households, the roots of a good marriage, the strength of great friendships.

Will we accept that things will always be the way they are and be carried along the river of times events?

Or will we, and those around the world who see the Christ-child, poor and rich, Kings, Magi, the wise, the poverty-stricken, the weak, will we with a simple yes to God, with the shepherds and the Magi, step into something new, into the life of the child in the manger, the child King who transforms the world?

Amen.

7 min read

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