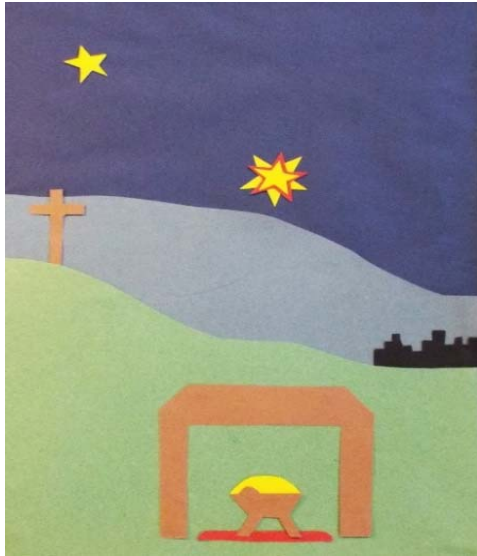


Christmas Eve 2024



Love

This communion service begins with a lighted candle, named Love, on a map of the world, bread and wine, and the first scene on the triptych. There is quiet Christmas music.

Leader On Christmas Eve we come together to prepare our hearts as we revisit the manger, at Bethlehem. At a still point in the turning world, we ask that we may be helped to receive God's gift of Jesus with fresh wonder. The pictures that make up this year's triptych are all new. They represent three fruits of the Spirit that were revealed uniquely in Jesus: Love, Joy, and Peace. During this communion service we focus on the first of these, Love.

Verses from the Bible about Love

"God loved the world so much that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life." John 3: 16

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." I John 4: 10

Leader Tonight as we gather near the Meridian
where East and West meet, and
remember friends
and family around the world...
Starlight dances overhead.
Moonlight ripples on lakes and seas.
While a hum of expectation is in the air.

Men Tonight...

Women Tonight is the night of restoration.

Men The night of the promise of dawn.

Women The night of birth and new beginnings.

Men Tonight...

Women Tonight is the time when Love comes
among us.

Sharing God's Gift of Peace

Leader In great love and wisdom, O God, you created this universe, making stars to dance and the light to sing, sunsets and dawns, waves to curve and seas to roar, mountains to draw and inspire us, animals to leap, and plants to flourish in seasons. You made humankind to be your children, so that we might walk, and talk freely with you, as members of your family, and your partners in caring for creation.

But we rebelled.

Seeking freedom, we gained bondage to sin. Seeking wisdom, we found lies.

Seeking immortality, we found death.

Like wilful children we hid from your gaze; distanced ourselves from your presence and denied our heritage. When the promised dawn came at Bethlehem, we preferred darkness to light.

But in grace and love You continued to reach out to us through the gift of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, offering us restoration and healing, peace, and reconciliation through His death on the cross.

As those who are made one in and through Him, let us share the Peace.

Leader May the peace of Christ be with you all

All And also with you

All share a greeting of peace

Hearing God's Word

Two Bible readings.

From the Old Testament:

The LORD passed before Moses and said, "The LORD, the LORD, He is a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." Exodus 34: 6

From the New Testament:

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be, has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." 1 John 3 (from verses 1-18)

Triptych One: Love

A Reflection on the Manger and the Cross

The first part of the triptych this year is set in the fields close to Bethlehem. It is a clear, starlit night.

There are two prominent features: a manger and a cross.

Taken together they reveal the heart of the good news of Christmas, and of the love of God.

The name given to the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger was, of course, Jesus. This was not the choice of Mary or Joseph, but of God. And, like the name Joshua, it means rescuer or saviour. Jesus was God's gift to the world, long promised. and sent with a mission: to save the world from the ravages of human sin.

As Jesus grew up, He lived in a radically new way, brimming with grace, truth, forgiveness and love. But that was not how He saved the world. It was only when he was completely abandoned and rejected by everyone, and nailed to a cross by Roman soldiers, that the birth in a manger made complete sense.

Mary, his mother pondered the reason for her son's birth all through his life, and she was agonisingly close to the cross when he died. As she looked back, one scarlet thread was woven all through the fabric of the story.

John the Baptist had called Jesus, "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world".

And remarkably, she had given birth to Jesus at Bethlehem. This was a town often mentioned in the Scriptures. In her time,

it was the place where shepherds raised lambs specifically for the purpose of Passover sacrifices.

There was a watchtower where shepherds looked out for ewes about to give birth. When this happened, they would take the ewe to a stable and assist in the birth to avoid any accidents and to detect any blemishes. The lambs for sacrifice had to be perfect. The shepherds would inspect newborn lambs, and those without blemish would be wrapped in strips of cloth to keep them warm and safe.

As she watched Jesus die, Mary found she was being taken back not only to his birth, but further than this, right back to this thread in the tapestry of the Scriptures.

All through the Jewish Scriptures people longed for the Promised, the Anointed One, the embodiment of God's unfailing, enduring love.

Her son was not to rule as a great earthly king or emperor, but to give His life as the Lamb of God, and in doing so to take on himself the sin of the world. He was the Passover Lamb: all the others were just copies.

Tonight, we thank God that Mary was willing to offer herself to be the mother of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Those who dare to ponder it all, like her, never get over God's love as shown by what happened on the Cross of Calvary.

This, this is the true love that the writers of the Gospels and the Epistles describe for their readers.

Here is a song that provides simple words to describe such love.
It was a favourite hymn of Victor White, and often sung on
Good Friday here in this room.

Hymn

It is a thing most wonderful,
almost too wonderful to be,
that God's own Son should come from heav'n,
and die to save a child like me.

I cannot tell how He could love
a child so weak and full of sin;
His love must be most wonderful
if He could die my love to win.

I sometimes think about the cross,
and shut my eyes, and try to see
the cruel nails and crown of thorns,
and Jesus crucified for me.

It is most wonderful to know
His love for me so free and sure;
but 'tis more wonderful to see
my love for Him so faint and poor.

And yet I want to love Thee, Lord;
O light the flame within my heart,
and I will love Thee more and more,
until I see Thee as Thou art.

W.W. How Tune: Herongate (arranged by V. Williams)

Praying for our Family and World

*Candles are lit from the Bethlehem candle and placed on
different parts of the world. The location, and one or more of
the extended family associated with that place, are named so
that we can pray for them together in words or silence.*

Breaking Bread Together

All 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.

Leader Jesus Christ came as the Lamb of God to take away
the sins of the world. In the light of this, let us
examine ourselves and confess our sins that he bore
on the cross.

A Time of Silence

Leader The child who was born for us was without
blemish or sin.

All We have sinned: forgive and heal us.

Leader Your precious gift to the world was despised and
rejected. Forgive the ways in which we have
neglected or spurned your grace.

All We have sinned: forgive and heal us.

Leader The One for whom, and through whom, all
things were created, showed us how to live in

harmony with each other, and with every part of the natural world.

All We have hurt each other and planet earth: forgive and heal us.

Leader The One you appointed to be ruler of the world was crucified. Forgive the ways in which we have been unfaithful to our rightful Lord.

All We have sinned: forgive and heal us.

Together Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent have mercy upon us, pardon and deliver us from all our sins, confirm and strengthen us in all goodness, and keep us in life eternal, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Leader With thanks and praise, O God, we come to your table of love. For Jesus Christ on the night during which he was betrayed took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you. Do this, as often as you eat in remembrance of me." After the supper, Jesus also took the cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, "Take and drink. This cup is my blood which is shed for the many for the forgiveness of sin. Drink all of it in remembrance of me."

Rejoice and be glad for this child of Mary is the Lamb of God, the Saviour through whom we have eternal life. Father God, send your Holy Spirit now so that we may dance for joy in the light of your promise of hope.

All Let this gift of salvation be ours for time and eternity.

Leader God's grace has called us here; let us partake of Christ's gift for all ages.

All Amen.

Hymn (Part One)

Behold the Lamb who bears our sins away,
Slain for us: and we remember:
The promise made that all who come in faith
Find forgiveness at the cross.
So we share in this Bread of life,
And we drink of His sacrifice,
As a sign of our bonds of peace
Around the table of the King.

The body of our Saviour, Jesus Christ,
Torn for you: eat and remember
The wounds that heal, the death that brings us life,
Paid the price to make us one.
So we share in this Bread of Life,
And we drink of His sacrifice
As a sign of our bonds of love
Around the table of the King.

The blood that cleanses every stain of sin,
Shed for you: drink and remember
He drained death's cup that all may enter in
To receive the life of God.
So we share in this Bread of Life,
And we drink of His sacrifice,
As a sign of our bonds of grace
Around the table of the King.

The Bread is taken and broken, and shared with the words:

The body of Christ was broken for you...Thank you.

The Wine is poured, and shared with the words:

The blood of Christ was shed for you...Thank you.

Leader May God bless you and keep always in the
arms of Christ, the love of God given to us for
all eternity.

All Amen.

Declaring our Faith

We believe in God the Creator, who made us and all things,
giving us all the gift of life, who set us on our path in this world.

We believe in God the Saviour, who is one with the Creator,
who rescued us and all creation from the dire consequences of
our violations against God and creation. This man, Jesus of
Nazareth, the Christ, the Light of the World, took on human
form having been born of Mary through the power of the Holy
Spirit. He lived and worked in this world among people just like
us. He walked God's path to death on a cross and rose from the
dead to open our pathway to eternal life.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit, our Counsellor and guide,
who is one with the Creator and the Christ, who through the
body and blood of Jesus brings us into communion with all
people, past, present and future; who calls us to walk a sacred
way of life through this world, caring for creation and the
people we meet on the way, loving them, helping them,
welcoming them without prejudice, being God's hands and feet

in the world, being God's messenger of the good news of Jesus
Christ.

*The candles are taken and placed beside the map as the final
poem is said or sung, leaving just the candle on Bethlehem.*

Hymn (Part Two)

And so with thankfulness and faith
We rise to respond: and to remember
Our call to follow in the steps of Christ
As His body here on earth.
As we share in His suffering,
We proclaim: Christ will come again!
And we'll join in the feast of heaven
Around the table of the King.

Blessing

Leader May the Father
who has loved the eternal Son
from before the foundation of the world,
shed that love upon you, his children.

All Amen

Leader May Christ,
The Lamb of God who saved us by His blood
Grant you, His peace.

All Amen.

Leader May the Holy Spirit
by whose overshadowing Mary became the
mother of our Saviour,
Give you grace to carry the good news of Christ.

All Amen

Leader And the blessing of God Almighty,
The Father, the Sone, and the Holy Spirit,
Be among you and remain with you always
All Amen

The candle named Love remains on the map at Bethlehem, a sign that the Light of Christ's love still shines in the darkness. Quiet music is played.

(This 2024 service follows a pattern developed over many years at Mill Grove. It is adapted each time so that the theme can be explored all through each part.

This year we have revisited the theme of 2023, Love, Joy and Peace to reflect on them afresh, aware that our fragile world is crying out for just these gifts of God's Spirit. The services are available on the Mill Grove website as a resource to households everywhere. The words and music for the two songs, and the Bible passages, are accessible online. If there is anything you would like to discuss or share with us, please let us know by email: millgrove@btinternet.com.)