

Mill Grove Christmas Eve Communion Service

Love



The 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 reflective Christmas music.

Leader On Christmas Eve we pause 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 ready to receive God's gift of Jesus with fresh wonder. The pictures that make up this year's triptych 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.

Poem

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

Christina Rossetti

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 the whole world hums with vibrant expectation.

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, seas to roar and waves to rise, mountains to challenge and inspire us, animals to leap and plants to flourish. You made humankind to be your children, so that we might walk, and talk freely with you, as members of your family, 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 rebellious children we ran from your presence; distanced ourselves from you 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

Psalm 136 1-6

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever.

to him who alone does great wonders, His love endures forever.

who made the great lights— His love endures forever.
the sun to govern the day, His love endures forever.
the moon and stars to govern the night; His love endures forever.

John 3: 16

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

I John 3 (from verses 1-18)

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.

Triptych One: Love

Message

Love is often represented in the shape of a heart, and coloured red.

Using red, the first part of the triptych depicts a rising sun. It is the promise of the dawn or “dayspring” in which we see God’s love in real, human form.

And the Holy Spirit is active, portrayed in the shape of a dove.

The birth of Jesus is only fully understood if we see it as God’s gift to the world, motivated by His love.

“Unto us a child is born; unto us a Son is given.”

“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.”

And this takes us into God’s very heart and being. God is love.

God is unique (unlike anything or anyone else). His love is unique because of its height, length, depth and breadth.

The psalm we read urges us to give thanks because His love endures for ever. Unconditional love that has no end.

God is also unique in that He exists in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are in perfect harmony: the supreme example of how to relate to one another in love.

Christmas involves each of these persons...

It is God who made the greatest gift of all time, simply because of love.

It is the Holy Spirit who is the Go-Between, through whom the Baby is conceived.

It is the Son who comes down to earth from heaven to be born as one of us.

Before Jesus came, during His life, and from then on, they continue to live and work in perfect harmony.

Jesus came to reveal God to us, and to teach us God's way of living: humble, forgiving, tender and full of grace. And as we receive God's gift of Jesus, and are forgiven through the death of our Saviour, Jesus, the Spirit helps tender shoots to grow and in time produce fruit.

And first of these fruits is Love. We know what true love is only through Jesus. And as He lives in us, His love stirs within us, until by God's Spirit, we are enabled to love as He loved us.

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

And we are among the privileged ones to know the name of this promised one, Jesus Christ. What's more we discover that He longs for us to be part of His family: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And the greatness of God's love is revealed when Jesus and the Spirit encourage us to talk to God as our Father: Abba, Daddy. It could not be a closer or more personal love.

Those who dare to pause, never get over God's love. Think of the state of the world tonight: why does God not intervene and call an end to suffering? We cannot reason an answer, but we know that in the end it is all about His love: he is compassionate, very slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

But we do not have to look far to understand God's love. Those of us who are willing to lay open the depths of our beings, our minds, thoughts and hearts, before God, acknowledge that our feelings are mixed, sometimes murky. Why should He love us enough to make the gift of His beloved Son, Jesus?

We wonder at His mercy and grace in forgiving us through the death of His beloved Son. We, who caused His pain, are welcomed to the family table. That is what true love is.

And so, this evening as we contemplate the baby in a manger, with the bread and wine, as signs of the death of Jesus, thirty-three years later, we do so with wonder. Amazing love, how can it be?

And as the Spirit works in us, something of that love, His love works through us and into our relationships with others.

A Christmas Carol is a story of change or conversion prompted by Christmas. May Scrooge's story be ours even if not quite so dramatically and suddenly.

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 the 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 Sun of Righteousness, the Dayspring from on high, to dispel the darkness of our hearts. In his light let us examine ourselves and confess our sins.

A Time of Silence

Leader Lord of grace and truth, we confess our unworthiness to stand in your presence as your children.

All We have sinned: forgive and heal us.

Leader The child who was born for us lived without sin.

- All** We have sinned: forgive and heal us.
- Leader** We have preferred darkness to light. 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 our Christ on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, gave thanks and 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." God so loved this world that he gave us the gift of his Son. Rejoice and be glad for this child of Mary is 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.

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 by Frank Houghton is said or sung, leaving just the candle on Bethlehem.

Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becomes poor.

Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man;
Stooping so low, but sinners raising
Heavenwards by thine eternal plan.
Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man.

Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee.
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,
Make us what thou wouldst have us be.
Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee.

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,
who by his incarnation gathered into one
things earthly and heavenly,
fill you with joy and peace.

All Amen

Leader May the Holy Spirit,
by whose overshadowing Mary became the God-bearer,
give you grace to carry the good news of Christ.

All Amen.

Leader And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.

All Amen.

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

(This 2023 service follows a pattern developed over time at Mill Grove. It is adapted each year so that the theme can be explored in each part. It is available on the Mill Grove website as a resource in households everywhere. The words and music of the two songs, and the Bible passages, can be found online. If there is anything you would like to discuss or share with us, please let us know by email: millgrove@btinternet.com.)