

## WINCHESTER, EASTLEIGH & ROMSEY CIRCUIT

Service at Home – Sunday 1st January 2023

### *Covenant Sunday*

prepared by the Revd John Archer

#### Introduction

One of the greatest contributions made by John Wesley to Christian worship is the Covenant Service, which traditionally we celebrate on the first Sunday of the year. The first Sunday in January is also the first Sunday of Epiphany when we celebrate the visit of the Magi after the birth of Jesus. These two elements are put together in this service. You may also, as you would in church, like to take communion. There will be a space in the service for you to do this, using some bread and juice, with the words that I have provided.

#### Prayers:

Glory to the Father, the God of love, who created us; who continually preserves and sustains us; who has loved us with an everlasting love, and given us the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ. ***Blessèd be God for ever.***

Glory to Jesus Christ our Saviour, who, though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, and was tested in every way as we are, yet without sin; who proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, and was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross; who was raised from the dead and is alive for ever, and has opened the kingdom of heaven to all who trust in him; who is seated at God's right hand in glory, and will come to be our judge. ***Blessèd be God for ever.***

Glory to the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, by whom we are born into the family of God, and made members of the body of Christ; whose witness confirms us; whose wisdom teaches us; whose power enables us; who will do for us more than we can ask or think. ***Blessèd be God for ever.***

To the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be praise and glory for ever. ***Amen.***

Read, sing or pray StF 222

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwCyLamhFrk>

1 Who would think that what was needed  
to transform and save the earth  
might not be a plan or army,  
proud in purpose, proved in worth?  
Who would think, despite derision,  
that a child might lead the way?  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

2 Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,  
monarchs scorn and angels sing;  
such a place as none would reckon  
hosts a holy helpless thing.  
Stable beasts and by-passed strangers  
watch a baby laid in hay:  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

3 Centuries of skill and science  
span the past from which we move,  
yet experience questions whether,  
with such progress, we improve.  
While the human lot we ponder,  
lest our hopes and humour fray,  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

John L. Bell (b. 1949) & Graham Maule (b. 1958)

Reading: Matthew 2 v 1-12

#### Sermon on Epiphany

##### The Background

The wise men were described as the Magi – we believe they were priests from Persia. They were skilled in philosophy, natural sciences, and were soothsayers (dream interpreters). They all believed in astrology – your destiny was settled by the star under which you were born. If a brilliant star broke into the order by appearing, then they could deduce that God was announcing something special. Lots of suggestions . . . but we don't really know. However, a Roman historian wrote at the time, '*There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world*'. So much speculation and stories, but we do know that the Magi were professional star watchers.

##### Lessons for Us

**They saw the star because they were looking for it.**  
'*There are none so blind as those who do not look.*'  
A young antique dealer went to a farmhouse sale. He checked out the Welsh dresser, grandfather clock and many other fine objects, noting what he would pay and that there would be fierce competition from fellow dealers. He came to the back kitchen – a cold dreary room. On the brown painted scarred table there was a collection of various pots and pans and utensils. It would be the last lot to be sold. He was struck by the table which he examined, carefully scraping away some of the flaking brown paint. He was convinced it was a 15<sup>th</sup> century Welsh oak table. After a long auction most of the dealers had gone, leaving a few farmers to bid for the pots and pans and utensils. He bought the whole lot for a few pounds and he gave all the

objects to a local farmer for helping him load the table into his van. When he cleaned it up it turned out to be a priceless find of a lifetime for him.

Are we carefully looking for God in the world and opportunities to serve him? Are we confidently looking for God to answer our prayers?

### **They followed the star**

The wise men did not endlessly discuss or argue or count the cost. In spite of the lack of knowledge they set off in faith. There is a lovely story about the famous French tightrope walker, Blondin. His tightrope was stretched across a section of the Niagara Falls. His first walk with a balancing rod was wildly cheered. Then to peoples' amazement he set off to return, wheeling a wheelbarrow. But he had not finished. He set off again with his assistant sitting in the barrow. When he reached the other side there were screams of excitement and relief. A loud man's voice cried out, "Do it again. Do it again." "Do you believe I can do it sir?" Blondin called back, "Yes I believe." The man called back, "Then will you climb into my wheelbarrow and let me wheel you across?!" The man declined!! He believed in Blondin but he didn't have faith in him! So often we lack faith in following God's call. There is work to be done in our church and the community. Keep your eyes open to see if God is calling you to do something – to follow the star in some way.

### **They kept their eyes up**

Climbers don't look down. That is the surest way to lose your footing or grip. We too easily look down and stumble over our own inadequacy. When I was a teenager one of my favourite choruses was 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his wonder and grace'. Jesus is the light to follow. We find him in prayer, bible study, worship, fellowship and service. A little poem appeals to me.

*To all who are sick and weary,  
Who feel you must 'lie up',  
My word to you is lie on your back  
For then you must look up.*

*You could of course lie on your face  
Looking at dull grey ground,  
Or lie on your side whichever you like  
Looking at things around.*

*But it's better far to lie on your back  
Relax and be quite still,  
For as you lie down you must look up  
And so fulfil his will.*

### **They gave God their gifts**

We all have gifts of some sort to bring and at our Covenant Service we open ourselves to God for his use. One of our troubles is that we often are too modest and say "I couldn't do that". Too many gifts languish in the shade. Benjamin Franklin said, "Hide not your talents – they for use were made. What use is a sundial in the shade!"

### **Conclusion**

What a great year it will be in 2023 if each of us in our church (wherever it is), who is personally committed to Jesus Christ, follows the wise men. Look up to God for guidance, follow in faith and commit ourselves and our talents to his service. The words of the Covenant Service which follow help us to put that into a promise.

### **Read pray or sing StF 224**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UB8rKNrlpDQ>

- 1 As with gladness men of old  
did the guiding star behold,  
as with joy they hailed its light,  
leading onward, beaming bright,  
so, most gracious Lord, may we  
evermore be led to thee.
- 2 As with joyful steps they sped,  
Saviour, to thy lowly bed,  
there to bend the knee before  
thee, whom heaven and earth adore,  
so may we with willing feet  
ever seek thy mercy-seat.
- 3 As they offered gifts most rare  
at thy cradle rude and bare,  
so may we with holy joy,  
pure, and free from sin's alloy,  
all our costliest treasures bring,  
Christ, to thee, our heavenly King.
- 4 Holy Jesus, every day  
keep us in the narrow way;  
and, when earthly things are past,  
bring our ransomed souls at last  
where they need no star to guide,  
where no clouds thy glory hide.
- 5 In the heavenly country bright  
need they no created light;  
thou its light, its joy, its crown,  
thou its sun which goes not down;  
there for ever may we sing  
alleluias to our King.

William Chatterton Dix (1837-1898)

### **Prayers of Intercession:**

Lord Jesus Christ, you promised that those who seek will find and in the pilgrimage of the Magi we find proof of that promise. We bring you prayers for all in our world who are searching.

*May your light shine in the darkness, a beacon of hope and a lamp to their path.*

We pray for those for whom the journey of life is hard, beset by pain, sickness or sorrow. In the trials they face and the burdens they struggle with, may your love break through and the message of the gospel bring strength and comfort, healing and inspiration.

*May your light shine in the darkness, a beacon of hope and a lamp to their path.*

We pray for those who have gone astray. May your love break through and the message of the gospel bring new beginnings, so that however low they have fallen, they will know themselves forgiven, accepted and restored.

*May your light shine in the darkness, a beacon of hope and a lamp to their path.*

We pray for those millions of people who have been driven out of their homes by current war and persecution. Especially we pray for those who have come to our country to find peace and security.

*May your light shine in their darkness a beacon of hope and a lamp to their path.*

Lord Jesus Christ may they all find in you the answer to their prayers and an end to their searching and suffering. In your name we ask it - **Amen**

**Reading:** Jeremiah 31 v 31 – 34

### **Collect:**

God of grace, through the mediation of your Son, you call us into a new covenant. Help us therefore to draw near with faith and join ourselves in a perpetual covenant with you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **The Covenant:**

God made a covenant with the people of Israel, calling them to be a holy nation, chosen to bear witness to his steadfast love by finding delight in the law. The covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ our Lord, in his life, work, death and resurrection. In him all people may be set free from sin and its power, and united in love and obedience.

In this covenant God promises us new life in Christ. For our part we promise to live no longer for ourselves but for God. We meet, therefore, as generations have met before us, to renew the covenant which bound them and binds us to God.

Let us then seek forgiveness for the sin by which we have denied God's claim upon us.

Let us pray - God of mercy, hear us as we confess our sins - for the sin that has made us slow to learn from Christ, reluctant to follow him, and afraid to bear the cross: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive.**

For the sin that has caused the poverty of our worship, the formality and selfishness of our prayers, our neglect of fellowship and the means of grace, and our hesitating witness for Christ: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive.**

For the sin that has led us to misuse your gifts, evade our responsibilities, and fail to be good stewards of your creation: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive.**

For the sin that has made us unwilling to overcome evil with good, tolerant of injustice, quick to condemn, and selfish in sharing your love with others: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive.**

***Have mercy on me, O God, in your constant love; in the fullness of your mercy blot out my offences. Wash away all my guilt, and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Give me the joy of your help again and strengthen me with a willing spirit.***

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Therefore to all who truly repent this is his gracious word: 'Your sins are forgiven'.

**Amen. Thanks be to God.**

### **Read pray or sing StF 549**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pl59ww2u8qc>

- 1 Come, let us use the grace divine,  
and all, with one accord,  
in a perpetual covenant join  
ourselves to Christ the Lord:
- 2 Give up ourselves, through Jesu's power,  
his name to glorify;  
and promise, in this sacred hour,  
for God to live and die.
- 3 The covenant we this moment make  
be ever kept in mind:  
we will no more our God forsake,  
or cast his words behind.
- 4 We never will throw off his fear  
who hears our solemn vow;  
and if thou art well pleased to hear,  
come down, and meet us now.
- 5 To each the covenant blood apply,  
which takes our sins away;  
and register our names on high,  
and keep us to that day.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

## The Covenant

Beloved in Christ, let us again claim for ourselves this Covenant which God has made with his people, and take upon us the yoke of Christ.

This means that we are content that he appoint us our place and work, and that he himself be our reward.

Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both; in some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

Therefore let us make this covenant of God our own. Let us give ourselves to him, trusting in his promises and relying on his grace.

Lord God, Holy Father, since you have called us through Jesus Christ to share in this gracious covenant, we take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience and, for love of you, engage ourselves to seek and do your perfect will. We are no longer our own but yours.

***I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.***

***And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.***

As we have entered this covenant not for ourselves alone, but as God's servants and witnesses, let us pray for the Church and for the world.

Loving God, hear us as we pray for your holy catholic Church: ***make us all one, that the world may believe.***

Inspire and lead all who govern and hold authority in the nations of the world: ***establish justice and peace among all people.***

Have compassion on all who suffer from any sickness, grief or trouble: ***deliver them from their distress.***

We praise you for all your saints who have entered your eternal glory: ***bring us all to share in your heavenly kingdom.***

Let us pray in silence for our own needs and for those of others . . .

Lord our God, you have helped us by your grace to make these prayers, and you have promised through Christ our Lord that when two or three agree in his name you will grant what they ask. Answer now your servants' prayers according to their needs; in this world grant that we may truly know you, and in the world to come graciously give us eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

## The Lord's Supper

The Lord has made an everlasting covenant of peace with his people. The peace of the Lord be always with you. **And also with you.**

Take your bread and say: "*The body of Christ keep me in eternal life.*" Take the juice and say: "*The blood of Christ keep me in eternal life.*"

## Prayer:

Faithful God, with these holy gifts you have fed and strengthened us in Jesus Christ your Son. Guide us on our way, that with all your faithful people we may come to share the feast of your eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

## Read pray or sing Hymns & Psalms 128

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM-HzKUEvyY>

Wise men, seeking Jesus, travelled from afar,  
guided on their journey by a beauteous star.

But if we desire him, he is close at hand;  
For our native country is our Holy Land.

Prayerful souls may find him by our quiet lakes,  
meet him on our hillsides when the morning breaks.

In our fertile cornfields while the sheaves are bound  
In our busy markets, Jesus may be found.

Fishermen talk with him by the great North Sea,  
as the first disciples did in Galilee.

Every town and village in our land might be  
made by Jesus' presence like sweet Bethany.

He is more than near us if we love him well;  
for he seeketh ever in our hearts to dwell.

James Thomas East (1860-1937)

## Blessing

The blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be upon us and remain with us for ever. **Amen.**

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