

Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church 2020

Sit comfortably in a quiet place and prepare, start with a brief period of silence, turning your mind and spirit towards God. You may want to have a cross or candle in view as a focus.

Nativity for Grown-ups

Opening Sentences Isaiah 9:6-7

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Hymn StF 178 Long ago, prophets knew (Theodoric)

Long ago, prophets knew
Christ would come, born a Jew,
come to make all things new;
bear his people's burden,
freely love and pardon:

*Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring!
Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing!
When he comes,
when he comes,
who will make him welcome?*

God in time, God in man,
this is God's timeless plan:
he will come, as a man,
born himself of woman,
God divinely human:

Mary, hail! Though afraid,
She believed, she obeyed.
In her womb, God is laid;
till the time expected,
nurtured and protected:

Journey ends! Where afar
Bethlem shines, like a star,
stable door stands ajar.
Unborn Son of Mary,
Saviour, do not tarry!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPGN-k9yuJQ>

Prayer of Adoration

Loving God,
we rejoice in this season of good news and good will,
we celebrate once more the birth of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ,
the Prince of Peace
the Lord of lords,
the Word made flesh,
and we praise you for the assurance of his final triumph.

As you came through him,
so you shall come again.

For coming among us through Jesus,
for bearing our flesh and blood,
for living our life and sharing our humanity,
for entering our world,
loving God, we praise you!

As you came through him,
so you shall come again.

For suffering and dying among us,
for your victory over death,
your triumph over evil,
and your promise that the kingdom will come,
loving God, we praise you!

As you came through him,
so you shall come again.

For the wonder of this season,
for its message of love and forgiveness,
its promise of peace and justice,
and the gift of life everlasting of which it speaks,
loving God, we praise you!

As you came through him,
so you shall come again.

Loving God,
we rejoice again in this season of good news and good will,
and we look forward to that day
when the Jesus of Bethlehem will be the Lord of all.

As you came through him,
so you shall come again.

In Christ's name we praise you! **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

Loving God,
the great festival of Christmas is here
there is so much that has become an accepted
and expected part of this season.
Yet, in all the bustle, we so easily forget
the most important thing of all:
responding to the wonderful gift of your Son.

You have come to us in Christ:
forgive us when we fail to receive him.

We tell ourselves that we are different -
that we will be worshipping you Sunday by Sunday,
sharing in services of lessons and carols,
hearing again familiar and well-loved verses of Scripture,
but we know that this isn't enough in itself,
for these too can become just another part
of our traditional celebrations,
washing over us
rather than communicating the great message of the Gospel.
We become so concerned with the wrapping
that we fail to recognise the gift concealed underneath.

You have come to us in Christ:
forgive us when we fail to receive him.

Forgive us for relegating Jesus to the periphery of our celebrations,
rather than placing him at the centre where he belongs;
for turning this season into a time for material extravagance,
rather than an opportunity for spiritual fulfilment;
for doing so much to prepare for Christmas on the surface,
yet so little to make ourselves ready within.

You have come to us in Christ:
forgive us when we fail to receive him.

Loving God,
open our hearts now to hear again your word,
to welcome the living Christ,
and to reflect on our response to his call.
May this Advent season teach us
to welcome him afresh into our lives
and to rejoice in his love not just at Christmas
but always.

You have come to us in Christ:
forgive us when we fail to receive him.

We ask it for his name's sake. **Amen.**

Part one – introduction

This year the traditional Nativity play has had to go online! Although our nativity plays will no doubt be updated to give it a more contemporary feel it will of course contain all the usual traditional elements. Mary and Joseph will arrive late with a donkey; the curmudgeonly innkeeper will tell them that there is no room; Mrs Innkeeper will take pity on the pregnant Mary and suggest that they use the stable round the back; the baby will be born and a great star will appear over the stable; the shepherds will turn up complete with sheep to see the baby that they have been told about; when they leave three wise men will arrive with the traditional gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh; and then the assembled cast will sing of their final song. Some parts of the nativity stories from the Bible will be missed out of course – particularly the Massacre of the Innocents, but all the key bits will be there.

Our traditional nativity story has seen changes and accretions over the years until they have become just a fable for children. But there is more to the Nativity than that. We should look again at the nativity stories that we find in Luke and in the light of what we know about the times when Jesus was born. In doing so some of the old traditional tales will need to be questioned, and that may upset some people, but I believe we will get more powerful insight into the meaning of those nativity stories.

1st Reading Luke 2:1-20

Of taxes, architecture, and hospitality.

In keeping with his narrative account to a largely Greek audience Luke is keen to establish the exact date of the birth of Jesus. In the ancient world the idea of a dating system, such as we have, was unknown. The timing of events was established by the accession of rulers or local events. So, Luke sets this very clearly in the days of Caesar Augustus as Emperor and when Quirinius was the Governor of Syria.

The Emperor Augustus decrees a census – for the purposes of taxation. We are told that this was the first census, as in the experience of Luke’s hearers they would have been of subsequent censuses. But this first census marks a significant change because of the problems that the Roman Empire was experiencing about public expenditure. The census takes place at the conclusion of the long civil war between the generals Julius Caesar and Pompey, and which was continued by factions associated with them following the assassinations of both. It saw the end of the traditional Roman Republic and the rise of Imperial Rome. It was a time when the Roman Empire’s finances were considerably depleted. Rome’s public expenditure went on the army – well over 50% was spent on maintaining it, and these forces had been built up very considerably during the civil wars. Romans in the army could expect a pension and land to farm when they were retired, but by the end of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Empire, Rome had become a very unequal place. A tiny minority owned most of the wealth of the Empire – it’s calculated that the top 5% owned 90 % of the wealth. Most of this wealth was in the form of land and there was little left for retiring Roman soldiers. Instead they had to be paid off with pensions and given land in conquered territories. With such an unequal society it was imperative that the rulers kept the lid on the common people – the plebs - and they did so by the traditional policy of “bread and circuses”. But these demanded payment to suppliers of Rome, and together with the very conspicuous consumption of the elite, the outflow of currency from Rome was considerable. Rome was only able to sustain its empire by having cheap labour – in the form of slavery – and by making sure that its conquered peoples reimbursed it for the cost of keeping the army of occupation. This was decidedly unpopular. The Romans arranged censuses to provide a tax base which they subsequently franchised out, so they got their money, and the franchisees recouped their costs plus a percentage from the local population.

Making sure that a census was complete was not an easy task. But in Judaea and the Jewish offshoot in Galilee the process was somewhat simplified. The Jews already had an efficient taxation system whereby devout Jews paid an annual Temple tax. The Jewish taxation system was based on tribes, and each tribe had its own location. For the most part in Judaea people were local to their tribal centre, but in Galilee which was an offshoot of Judaism in the North the way that the census was to be taken involved pious Jews travelling south into Judaea to be registered at their town. That is why Joseph and Mary set out on a long journey towards Bethlehem, because Joseph was of the House of David.

It would have been a difficult and dangerous journey. Between Galilee and Judaea was the land of Samaria and for long-established historical reasons the Jews and Samaritans had a mutual hatred. To travel to Bethlehem Joseph and Mary would have had to circumvent Samaria and probably travelled in a larger group for safety against hostile inhabitants and the dangers of thieves and robbers. It is unlikely they would have received any hospitality along the way, but as they approached Bethlehem is likely that the company they were in

begin to peel off to go to relatives or to rely on the natural hospitality that is expected in the Middle East which extends even to strangers. Mary, being heavily pregnant, would ride on a donkey but that would be slow going. As the group approached Judaea the chances are that they would have been left behind to do the final miles of the journey themselves. For them to arrive late in the day could be expected.

Some years ago, the editors of the Jerusalem Bible produced a revised edition. The translation of verse 7 caused an uproar. It told of how Mary wrapped her son in a cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no room “in the living space”. Traditionalists asked what had happened to the inn! This is one of those little problems of translation that has become embedded in tradition. Except for remote locations where there were no villages or townships, the Middle East of biblical times did not have inns. When Luke came to write his gospel in Greek, he needed to find a word that would render “living space” and the word he chose in Greek can imply an inn or a hostel. When Jerome came to translate the Greek into Latin, he used the word *mansio* – which was a Roman term for an inn, commonly used of the bathhouse and accommodation used by Roman messengers. And so, when English versions translated from the Latin and Greek, they use the word inn.

To understand what’s happening here we need briefly to have a look at Middle Eastern common architecture of the time. Rich houses were built around a courtyard, and Jesus often took meals in such a courtyard when offered hospitality on his journeys. It was in such courtyards that the local townsfolk would stand around the table to listen to the words of the rabbi, and it was in such courtyards that Jesus made statements, healed, and forgive sins that so outraged his hosts. But for common people the type of building they had looked like this.

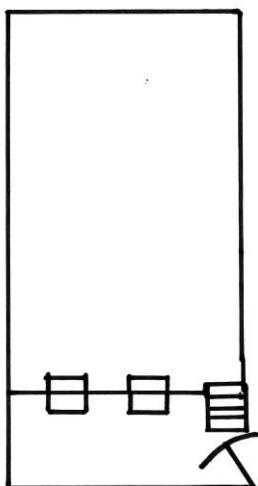


Figure 1 Plan

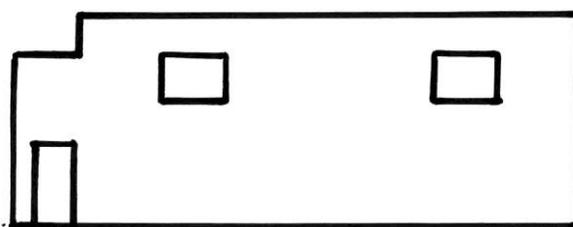
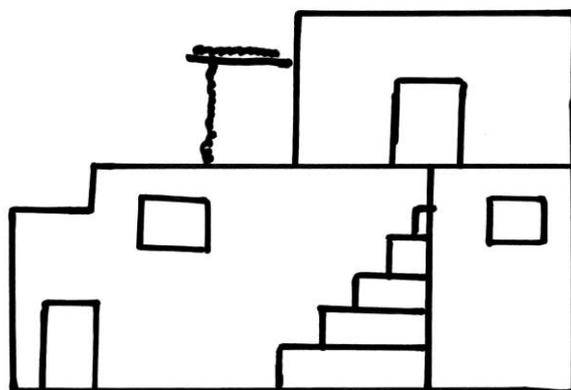


Figure 2- Elevation

There was a rectangular building built partly of stone and mud brick, with an area at the front where the important animals were kept overnight. It was in this stable that the ox, the ass, and the cow would be kept. In the morning they would be taken outside and tethered. Between the house and the stable there were a few steps down to the one door that opened at the side. To make sure that the animals were fed overnight there was a cut-out area in the lower wall which acted as a manger into which fresh hay stored at the bottom of the house could be placed for the animals to eat overnight, so they did not spoil the stocks of hay if it were kept in the stable. As time went on their richer households would be able to build an additional room on top of the living space for the family and supply it with

an external staircase. This was for guests, an essential part of keeping up with the hospitality requirements that were culturally expected. It was in such an upper room as this that Jesus ate the Last Supper with his disciples.



So, if Joseph and Mary, now in labour, turned up at such a house there was no possibility that they would be refused hospitality. It simply would not happen. Instead the women of the house, seeing Mary's condition, would rush her into the family's accommodation to help in the delivery, and the men of the house will be summarily ejected into the street, as men are useless in such circumstances. Normally, Mary would have been taken to the upper room to be looked after – but they had arrived so late that the family had already extended hospitality to other travellers. So, they had to look after Mary in the bottom part of the house where the hay was kept immediately adjacent to the stable. And when the baby was born there would be no place to put the child safely, but on fresh hay in the cut-out where the animals fed overnight. But to do that safely the animals would have to be hobbled so that they could not eat as they normally did. The chances are that the men of the house hobbled the animals by getting them to kneel– “ox and ass before him bow/and he is in the manger now” – as the hymn has it. So, Mary was delivered have her child which was put in the manger “because there was no room in the living space”.

Coincident with this would be the appearance of the light in the sky – which has long been speculated as being a supernova whose light reached Earth at that time. The new star in the sky would instantly be recognised by people for whom the night sky was both familiar and significant in terms of the cycle of the year and travel. It would be spotted by the shepherds on the hill who, were away from any kind of light pollution that may have conceivably existed in the town, and as they look down to the town, they would have seen the commotion taking place outside the house. Men milling about in the street would undoubtedly have attracted interest from other people, and the story of the pregnant woman giving birth in the house would probably have circulated on the grapevine with its usual rapidity. So, the shepherds come down to see what going on. They have no problem in finding the right house – with all the commotion going on it would have been easy. But the shepherds they were outcasts in the community because they could not keep properly to the requirements of the Law, so they were admitted into the house only briefly to see the baby and told the story of the miraculous light that appeared in the sky. And as they returned, no doubt, they told anybody that they met of what they had seen and what was going on just up the road.

Hymn StF 190 Angels from the realms of glory (Iris)

Angels, from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth;
you who sang creation's story,
now proclaim Messiah's birth:

*Come and worship
Christ, the new-born King
come and worship
worship Christ, the new-born King*

Shepherds in the field abiding,
watching o'er your flocks by night.
God with us is now residing,
yonder shines the infant Light:

Sages, leave your contemplations;
brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great Desire of nations;
you have seen his natal star:

Saints before the altar bending,
watching long in hope and fear,
suddenly the Lord, descending,
in his temple shall appear:

Though an infant now we view him,
he shall fill his Father's throne,
gather all the nations to him;
every knee shall then bow down:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17TqZQ9ldk>

2nd Reading Matthew 2:1-1-18

Of travellers, paranoid rulers, and refugees.

Matthew's story of the Nativity contains elements not found elsewhere in the Gospels. His account of the birth of Jesus is almost perfunctory. We are not told anything about a journey to Bethlehem, but the opening line in Matthew's account places Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem, without saying why they got there.

The interest instead is in the arrival of Magi from the East. We are traditionally told that there were three of them, (though it's not in the text) – and in mediaeval times they even received names, Melchior, a Persian scholar; Casper, a Moor; and Balthazar, a Babylonian scholar. We know that there was more than one, and that since they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the assumption is that there were three. The gifts, as you probably know, were symbolic, the gold representing princely power; the frankincense,

priestly authority; and the myrrh representing the incense for death. There is also a strong tradition that these were astronomers of the Zoroastrian tradition and that they came from the area of northern Persia where Zoroastrianism was practised. All of this is speculation. They were a group of Magi and they came from the East. The presents that they brought with them included some costly incense that was collected from the gum of trees that were commonly found in Yemen. So, their travel to Jerusalem need not necessarily have come by way of the Tigris/Euphrates basin and the Jordan Valley, but they could have come on the route that leads up from Yemen through Mecca and Medina and approaches Jerusalem from the South.

It probably matters little which direction and route they took, but it was their impact on Herod the Great that is most significant. Herod the Great was a figure of dubious morality. The Jews had longed for an independent kingdom of their own and in the period between the demise of the Greek Seleucid Empire and the rise of Rome they had briefly had a semi-independent kingdom. But when Pompey the Great began to annex territory in the Levant, Turkey, and Egypt, Herod decided that it would be best if he threw his lot in with Pompey before Pompey conquered Judaea. In doing so he was following the example of many kingdoms and small principalities in the Levant area. But in doing so he betrayed Jewish independence. His reward was to be awarded the title “King of the Jews” by the Romans and gaining authority as a puppet ruler over Judaea, Samaria, and Galilee. To placate the Jews, Herod began a major rebuilding of the Temple, enlarging it and embellishing it. The Wailing Wall, which Jews still revere, is the last remaining fragment of his Temple that we are told in the Bible that took 49 years to build – and was just about being completed during the ministry of Jesus.

But Herod backed the wrong horse. Pompey the Great was assassinated in Alexandria, during the rise of Julius Caesar to power. When Caesar was assassinated, Rome was plunged into turmoil until eventually the faction led by Octavian, subsequently Caesar Augustus, was victorious. Herod was forced to go to Rome to have his designation as “King of the Jews” confirmed, which it was. This may have been the background to Jesus’s parable about the King who went away to be confirmed and returned to punish those who had sent after him asking that he not be made King. For undoubtedly the Jewish people did not much care for Herod as their King given what he had done.

Herod showed signs of a ruthless paranoia in wanting to keep his kingdom intact. When he remarried after divorcing his first wife, he murdered her and all her children so that his children by his second wife would inherit the kingdom – which they did. Archelaus received Judaea; Herod Antipas – the Herod of Jesus’s ministry – got Galilee; and Philip got the Greek speaking area of the Decapolis on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. So, you can imagine what would happen when a group of sages turned up from the East asking where was the one who was born “to be King of the Jews”. Herod would have feared for his own security and that of his sons. But Herod being a crafty and cunning individual plays along with the Wise Men’s request and establishes that Bethlehem is the likely location of the Messiah – the Christ – who was expected. It is also entirely in line with the character of the man that he secretly finds out from the Magi exactly when the star appeared and commissions them to go and search for the child under the false premise that he wants to come and worship him too. That is precisely what he is not intending to do. Any such threat to his throne would have been instantly and brutally eliminated.

So, the Magi follow the star to Bethlehem and find Jesus. However, there is no suggestion that they do so on the night of his birth and in a stable. Instead they find him in a house in Bethlehem. If the star that had appeared to them was the same star that had appeared to

the shepherds, as seems likely, there would have been a considerable period before they turned up to worship Jesus. We can guess how long from what happens next. The Magi, rightly suspicious of Herod, decided not to go back to him but leave Bethlehem by an alternative route. When they don't return Herod is furious and gives orders for the Massacre of the Innocents – which is entirely in line with what we know of him. The orders are to kill all the children under the age of 2 in Bethlehem or in the vicinity. This suggests that they are looking for Jesus as a toddler, still around Bethlehem.

This is a point at which Matthew's account in Luke's account vary. Luke has Jesus returning as a babe in arms with his parents to Galilee. Matthew's account seems to place Jesus continuing to live with Mary and Joseph initially in Bethlehem and only returning to Galilee later. It seems to be a more likely scenario, it would have been hard to take a new-born back on the long journey through Samaria, and because Joseph is what the Greeks called a tekton – a skilled craftsman – he would have had no difficulty in finding employment in Bethlehem, since he was independent and not tied to the land as a farmer.

Joseph is warned, like the Wise Men, of Herod's intention – it would be very difficult to disguise what was going to happen. So, he takes Mary and the baby South to Egypt. Again, this makes sense if they are in Bethlehem. The route south to Egypt was known as "the way of Horus" and it would not have taken long to be out of Judaea and moving south into the series of fortified villages and trading points that were dotted along that route. If they had been based in Galilee, then fleeing South to Egypt would have been a dangerous proposition – they would have done better to have gone north into Syria. Only when Herod the Great is dead do Joseph and Mary return, and wisely they stay away from Bethlehem and move north again to Galilee – to live quietly in an out-of-the-way place given what has happened. This is what Matthew tells us, Judaea was under the control of Herod's eldest son Archelaus. He did not get on well with his brothers, particularly the scheming Herod Antipas. Living quietly in Nazareth Joseph and Mary were unlikely to attract attention.

The fresh look?

The Christmas story is all tangled up with historical accretions to the tale set out by Luke and Matthew, and by the traditions of a modern secular culture. It's easy to dismiss the stories of the Nativity as fables and myths which give us a warm glow at a very dark and bleak time of the year, but are suitable only for children's plays when we, as adults, enjoy the simplicity of children's delights and beliefs.

The Nativity is not a story for children – it's a story for adults. In looking afresh at the Nativity, we must put aside some of those much-treasured traditional elements. Probably there was no Inn, no innkeeper, no innkeeper's wife, no stable round the back. Were there three Wise Men? Maybe, but we certainly don't know their names or where they came from. Did they turn up immediately after the shepherds at that stable? – almost certainly not.

But what we do have instead is a story of common people behaving decently at a time of crisis and looking after a pregnant woman and her child. We have the outcast shepherds being admitted to see the child even though they were ritually impure and really shouldn't have come into the house. We have Wise Men turning up to confront a vicious and paranoid ruler who on hearing their message determined to get rid of the threat to his power and to the inheritance of his sons by undertaking a most cruel massacre. We have the story of parents fleeing with their child to safety as economic refugees and living

outside of their homeland until it was safe for them to return. We have them as returning migrants keeping their heads down and out of the way of the authorities because of what had happened to them in the past.

All this in the context of a mighty world power where there was gross inequality, and bribery of the common people to try and prevent revolts. There was rampant corruption and injustice. There was betrayal of the people's political aspirations to the ambitions of wily politicians. We have a ruling class that engaged in conspicuous consumption, that had taken over most of the wealth of the country, and that had neglected their public responsibilities to provide resources and infrastructure for the common good. The mighty world power was now in financial difficulties, only sustained economically by the institution of slavery, and sought to overcome those difficulties by exploiting the poorest and weakest in their empire - the worst example of colonial behaviour. No wonder people had lost hope and believed that they were living in a loveless world abandoned to chance and fate.

Much of this has a familiar ring to us. The economic and political injustice of the first century A.D. is very much like that experienced today. A deeply divided society where the wealthy gain all the benefits whilst the poor struggle is our experience too. Intolerance, and division we know of. The casual cruelty of individuals with supreme power in their countries regularly fills our news broadcasts. The ambition of politicians to further their own interests irrespective of the common good is commonplace. The plight of the migrant and refugee is ever before us. The Christ of that comes at Christmas this year is the Christ that came at Christmas 2000 years ago. The message of salvation that he brings remains unchanged. That message would turn the world upside down, if we but believe that with all our heart. The Christ the comes this Christmas can turn our lives upside down if we hear his words as we kneel before him in worship.

Prayer of intercession

Lord Jesus Christ,
we remember today
how so many looked forward to your coming,
but we remember also
how it became harder to go on believing
as the years went by;
how hope started to splutter and dreams began to die
until, finally, you came -
the fulfilment of prophecy,
the culmination of God's purpose,
the definitive expression of his love.

Lord of all, the Word made flesh,
bring hope to your world today.

We remember with gladness
how you brought hope throughout your ministry,
a sense of purpose to those for whom life seemed pointless -
the poor, sick, outcasts and broken-hearted -

light shining in their darkness,
joy breaking into their sorrow,
new beginnings in what had seemed like the end.

Lord of all, the Word made flesh,
bring hope to your world today.

Hear now our prayer for those caught today in the grip of despair -
those for whom the future seems bleak,
optimism seems foolish,
and trust seems futile.
Reach out in love,
and may light shine into their darkness.

Lord of all, the Word made flesh,
bring hope to your world today.

Hear our prayer for those whose goals in life have been thwarted,
whose dreams have been shattered,
who have grown weary, cynical and disillusioned.
Reach out in love,
and rekindle their faith in the future.

Lord of all,
the Word made flesh,
bring hope to your world today.
Hear our prayer for those who mourn,
or who wrestle with illness,
or who watch loved ones suffer.
Reach out in love,
and grant them your strength and comfort.

Lord of all, the Word made flesh,
bring hope to your world today.

Hear our prayer for those whose lives are blighted by injustice,
crushed by oppression, poverty, hunger,
and encourage all who work against the odds
to build a better world.
Reach out in love,
and grant the assurance of your coming kingdom.

Lord of all, the Word made flesh,
bring hope to your world today.

Lord Jesus Christ,
we remember your promise to come again in glory,
the culmination of God's purpose,
the ultimate victory of love.
May that conviction bring new faith,
new vision,
and new purpose wherever life seems hopeless.

Lord of all, the Word made flesh,
bring hope to your world today.

As Jesus taught us so we pray.....

Lord's Prayer

**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.**

Hymn StF 167 Colours of day dawn into the mind (Light up the Fire)

Colours of day dawn into the mind,
the sun has come up, the night is behind.
Go down in the city, into the street,
and let's give the message to the people we meet.

*So light up the fire and let the flame burn,
open the door, let Jesus return.
Take seeds of his Spirit, let the fruit grow,
tell the people of Jesus, let his love show.*

Go through the park, on into the town;
the sun still shines on, it never goes down.
The light of the world is risen again;
the people of darkness are needing a friend.

Open your eyes, look into the sky,
the darkness has come, the sun came to die.
The evening draws on, the sun disappears,
but Jesus is living, his Spirit is near.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4Y2kRILyTw>

Blessing

Whatever today may hold,
whatever tomorrow might bring,
the future is secure,
for Christ is with us,
the same yesterday, today and for ever.
Live each moment with him
in quiet confidence and joyful celebration,
for he is ours
and we are his
for all eternity.
Amen.