

Second Sunday after Christmas

3 January 2021

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Call to Worship

At the beginning of a new year, we gather again for worship in church or at home, to give God thanks that we could turn the page to a new calendar year full of new possibilities, after what has been a very difficult year. We gather to pray that God may help us look beyond our present worries to be hopeful for the days to come. And we do so as we rejoice at the wonder of God's love that came down at Christmas and which has blessed us in the past and will guide us into the future. So, let us give thanks and rejoice.

Hymn Joy to the world

Prayer

God of yesterday, today and tomorrow, we join together in worship this first Sunday of the New Year, in a mixture of hope, anticipation, fear and worry. We do not know what the year holds for us and there are things we are afraid of. We continue to worry about the pandemic and wonder how long we will have to live with restrictions in our lives. We worry about our health and that of our family and friends; we are fearful about the NHS being overwhelmed, about young people missing out on school, about the long term impact of the pandemic on so many people's lives, about job losses and financial hardship.....Yet, we know that there is also much to look forward to - "better days" ahead when the COVID-19 vaccines will start to protect us, when we can enjoy the company of family and friends again, when we can celebrate occasions together, when we can meet in pubs and restaurants, enjoy entertainment and plan holidays...and when we can all gather in church again and share the fellowship we have missed. Gracious God, the coming year is full of uncertainty, but we also have hope. Whatever the year holds for us we trust you, and we place every day of this new year in your care, knowing that, as in the past, you are with us, caring for us with constant love. And so, Lord, we come to worship you today to place ourselves again into your keeping and to dedicate our lives to your service through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour. **Amen.**

Scripture Reading Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 (NRSV & Paraphrased)

Reflection

"For last year's words belong to last year's language and next year's words await another voice. And to make an end is to make a beginning." (T.S. Eliot in *Little Gidding*) You may have heard Ursula von Leyen quote the last line when she announced that, finally, a trade deal had been agreed between the UK and the EU, expressing the hope that this deal would mean a new beginning after all the Brexit wrangles over the past years. Yes, the UK enters a "new chapter" but for me, as an EU citizen, and for many among you, this new beginning, with all its possibilities is also tinged with sadness. Of course, any new beginning is full of new possibilities and the quote from T.S. Eliot seems pertinent as we are at the beginning of a new year and we hope that somehow, sometime in the new year we can leave the tragedy, the sadness and losses of the COVID-19 pandemic behind us. Not right away, we know, as the pandemic continues, but ushering in the new year we always hope and dream that things will be better....and it will not take much to make the new year better as what a year 2020 has been! Any year has its tragedies but 2020 has been a very difficult year for so many people all over the world. The pandemic has overwhelmed hospitals and claimed numerous lives, and there is no let-up as infection rates keep rising. Families and friends have not been able to meet and give each other the support they so desperately needed. Businesses have been struggling and many people have been made redundant. And all this beside struggles for peace and justice within and between nations that we have witnessed this year as well as natural and human-made disasters that have caused so much damage and distress. It has been a very testing year for many and even our faith may have been tested too. Yes, we have continued to trust in God, that we are not alone, that God is with us. After all, Emmanuel, God-with-us, has come and *is* coming, to be with us and walk beside us, at all times and in all seasons of our lives. But trusting in God does not mean that we will not be deeply affected by the difficult and uncertain times we are living through. Personal tragedies do strike, fear and worry affect our mental health, at home alone we do feel lonely, faced with hardship we do protest... "*My God my God why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me...I cry by day but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest*" (Psalm 22). The Psalms certainly have given us words that express our grief. But the Psalms also express, again and again, a deep-seated trust

in the steadfast love of God who is God of life, healing and liberation. And this trust does not mean that life will not have its ups and downs but that we have a source of strength to face and respond to the times of weeping and mourning in our lives. Trust in God gives us hope that even if we cannot see beyond our worries and distress, God's love is constant and reaches out to us from beyond our limited vision to beckon us to "better days" and a hopeful future. But also, even in the midst of all our anxiety and struggles, there are God-filled moments, glimmers of hope in the here and now, signs of new life and healing, signs that the world is filled with beauty and nature sings the glory of God. Many of us, over the past year, have noticed wonderful things we otherwise paid little attention to, or which we just took for granted. For instance, the resourceful and determined ways people have been reaching out to each other, and especially to support the most vulnerable members in our communities. We continue to protest the inequalities in our society and in the world, so starkly revealed again during the pandemic, while we seek to bring relief to those who are in need and remind them that we care. And some among us have expressed their deep gratitude for the care they have received. So, 2020 has not been all bad and it may be good for us to remember any "God-filled" moments we have seen or experienced to sustain us in our faith and faithfulness, and to give us courage and strength as we journey into the new year. God *has been* with us in 2020 and *will be* with us in 2021. In every season of our lives, God is with us. Amen.

Hymn Lord for the years your love has kept and guided

Prayers of Intercession

As one year has ended and we have made our first few steps in the new year, we give thanks for new-born life in the past year, and pray for those who are expecting a child this year. We remember the people who died, and pray for your presence with the sick and dying at this time. We give thanks for all kinds of seeds planted in the past year, and your presence with those who plant and nurture, sow and reap. We remember all that came to an end, in good time or too soon, and we pray for healing and peace. We give thanks for the good times in the past year, and for those with whom we rejoiced, even if we could not physically be together. We remember the times we wept, and those who comforted us, and who let us comfort them.

We give thanks for the stories, the songs, the plays of the past year, and for the writers and artists who enrich our lives and communities. And we remember the laments of the year, and we pray for your presence with all who mourn. We give thanks for curiosity and wonder, for all we have learned over the year that is behind us, and we pray for your presence with teachers and pupils in the challenging days ahead. We remember the things we could not do in 2020, and we pray for courage to endure our cocoons a little while longer so as to grow new wings and fly when it is possible. We give thanks for those who have mended and healed the sick and broken and we pray for your presence and strength for health and care professionals and those who are in their care. We give thanks for silence that has helped us to hear, and we pray for the end of silence when injustice needs to be confronted. We give thanks for love, to give and receive, and we pray for support and friends for the lonely. We remember the times we have hated this year, with righteous anger at injustice and unmerited blaming. We give thanks for your peace that we do not fully understand, so must keep learning by living it. We remember the struggles of the past year and pray for your presence as we continue to face the pandemic, climate change, racial discrimination, growing inequality, natural and human made disasters and the challenges in our daily lives....Thank you for your presence through the year 2020 that has ended and thank you for your presence into the year that has just begun. We pray in the name of Emmanuel, Jesus Christ who taught us to pray.....OUR FATHER....

Offering

Loving God, we offer these gifts and all our good intentions to serve you and witness to your love which is always behind, beside and before us. May that love inspire us to be generous and kind in all our words and deeds, this coming year and always. Amen.

Hymn One more step along the world I go

Blessing

Lead us on, O God, to learn willingly, to love well, to live in trust. Surround us with hope, shield us from harm, set us on our way rejoicing. Let all God's people say **Amen**