

The Parish of Christchurch

*The Priory Church of the Holy Trinity, Christchurch
St George, Jumpers • St John at Purewell*



for the Twelve Days of Christmas, 2020-21

Dear Friends,

Merry Christmas! Or does that sound incongruous this year? After all, with so many family celebrations cancelled, loved ones separated by Covid-19 restrictions, a new variant spreading through many communities, and the vulnerable in our society at particular risk, what is there to be merry about in Christmas 2020? These are fair questions. This year, Scrooge's characteristic response to "Merry Christmas" might be more understandable than usual: "Bah! Humbug!"

It's said that there's a song for every occasion. Christmas has many songs, from traditional carols to more the more recent 'classics' beloved of television Christmas shows. Christmas 2020, as we all know, is different from any other in our lifetimes: so what might be THE song for this year?

Arguably, among the popular Christmas song repertoire, "Have yourself a merry little Christmas" might appear to be a contender. First sung by Judy Garland in the film "Meet me in St Louis", issued in 1944 while the Second World War was still raging, it has been performed by countless singers ever since, normally surrounded by the tree, tinsel and other trappings of a Christmas celebration. The song begins:

"Have yourself a merry little Christmas,
Let your heart be light;
From now on
Our troubles will be out of sight".

What all the cover versions and Christmas shows fail to capture is that, far from being a warm-hearted feel-good number, this is in fact a melancholy song, sung as the family in the film faces a total upheaval of their lives and an uncertain future. In fact, the original lyrics were changed before filming began, as the first version was deemed too depressing; subsequently, Frank Sinatra softened them again to make them more palatable.

Even in its sanitized form, "Have yourself a merry little Christmas" doesn't have an answer, just wishful thinking of the kind that can so let people down. We don't need to "let our hearts be light" – it would be cruel, given all the suffering, loss and disappointments brought about by the pandemic, to say we should try. Instead, I suggest that we look to other songs, whose message is as life-changing as when we first sang them.

This Christmas, of course, we have not been able to sing carols together in church, and many of you have told me how much you have missed them. Some of them tell the story, or part of it ("While Shepherds watched", "O come, all ye faithful", "Unto us a boy is born", or "The First Nowell" come to mind); they can help bring the story alive again within us and unite us with the events of the first Christmas. Others are a kind of meditation on the meaning of Jesus' birth.

During the twelve days of Christmas, rather than fretting about French hens, turtle doves or ten lords a-leaping, here are ten familiar carols that be the basis for our daily prayers between now and Epiphany. We could use one carol each day, spend time reading and mulling over the text, and then (if possible) sing along with a recording. All are widely available in hymnbooks or online. Each has something well worth pondering:

Christians awake salute the happy morn
God rest you merry, gentlemen
Hark! the herald
In the bleak midwinter
It came upon the midnight clear

O little One sweet
O little town of Bethlehem
Once in royal David's city
What child is this, who, laid to rest
The First Nowell

On the “Desert Island Discs” principle, if we could reflect on only one of these carols, it would have to be “Hark! the herald”, which is an extended meditation on the Incarnation: “ Light and life to all he brings, Risen with healing in his wings; Mild he lays his glory by, Born that man no more may die ...” – so wrote Charles Wesley, and so we sing and believe.

Rather than “let our hearts be light”, we can do something deeper and more powerful: this Christmas, we can resolve to let THE Light into our hearts and minds and imaginations and spirits, more fully than ever before. There’s the answer to “Bah! Humbug!”, this year and every year. Thanks be to God.

* * * * *

Information about forthcoming Services:

Sunday December 27	Priory	10.00am Eucharist, <i>also online</i>
Sunday January 3	Priory	8.00am BCP Holy Communion 10.00am Eucharist
	St George’s	9.30am Eucharist

* * * * *

The Revd Jonathan Evans’ final Sunday in the parish will be 24 January. If you have yet to make a contribution to his leaving gift, please follow the following guidance:

- **by bank transfer**, please use: Account Name - P.C.C. of Christchurch No.2 Account; Sort Code 52-21-34; Account Number 52428001.
- Please use "Curate" as the reference and email Ian Penny on prioryhouse@christchurchpriory.org, e l
- **by cheque**: please make cheques payable to P.C.C of Christchurch No.2. Account and mark for Ian’s attention. If posted, to Priory House, Quay Road, BH23 1BU. Whether by post or by hand, please clearly mark "Curate" on or in the envelope.
- **by cash**: please put in an envelope fao Ian and bring to the Priory, clearly marked as above.

* * * * *

I want to close this Christmas and New Year letter with some words from “O Little Town of Bethlehem”, a verse we don’t generally sing, but which seems to fit the challenges of Christmas 2020:

Where children pure and happy
Pray to the blessèd Child,
Where misery cries out to thee,
Son of the mother mild;
Where charity stands watching
And faith hold wide the door,
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,
And Christmas comes once more.

Christmas has indeed come once more, and with it the new dawn of faith, hope and love which the Christ Child came to bring “to all people”, even in the midst of the pandemic. In his name, then, and from the heart, I wish you all, and those you love, a joyful, blessed and merry Christmas. May God bless us, every one.

