

St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall

www.stmagnus.org

Scottish Charity SCO 05322/CCL No 119086

www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation

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Welcome to St Magnus Cathedral this morning. It was founded in 1137 by St Rognvald, in honour of Magnus, his uncle. The Cathedral belongs to the people of Orkney and its doors are open to all. If you are a visitor, we hope this order of service will help you feel part of our worship together.

You can find our Sunday worship here.

<https://www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation/>

or on YouTube here.

<https://youtu.be/hVMOfE3R6QM>

Join our Wednesday ZOOM meditation by signing up here.

stmagnuszoom@gmail.com

Candle Lighting and opening meditation

The Gospel of John speaks of Christ as the true light coming into the world. In commemoration of that coming, we light candles for the four weeks leading to Christmas and reflect on the coming of Christ. It is significant that the church has always used that language—the coming of Christ—because it speaks to a deep truth. Christ is coming. Christ is always coming, always entering a troubled world, a wounded heart. And so we light the first candle, the candle of hope, and dare to express our longing for peace, for healing, and the well-being of all creation.

We light this candle for all God's people, struggling to be bearers of hope in a troubled world.

As we wait for the divine promise to give us light, to give us hope a candle burns, the first
marker of our Advent journey.

As we set out, may we travel hopefully.

As we set out,
may we know that the God within travels with us.

The rain dulls the season with its dank weight, removing the lustre.
Colder, fresher days offering crisp mornings, are instead mist filled
and heavy clouds grey-in the day.

But did you know this is just cover for the promise. The promise
that is more glorious than all the frosty mornings and clear skies
and low sun can bring. Right now words are rehearsed and wings shined
and the promise unfolded.

In this season behind the grey, is a light that will find the crack
in the darkest moments and will run through with alleluias and gloria's of good news and peace to
all people and each will curl and twist, will bind and curve together in a performance of wonder,
as they take the shape
of a migrant child, vulnerable and fragile, made all of light.

And we will see him rising in the east, with the dawn. He is one of us

Reading

Luke 21:25-36

Strange things will happen to the sun, moon, and stars. The nations on earth will be afraid of the roaring sea and tides, and they won't know what to do. People will be so frightened that they will faint because of what is happening to the world. Every power in the sky will be shaken. Then the Son of Man will be seen, coming in a cloud with great power and glory. When all of this starts happening, stand up straight and be brave. You will soon be set free.

Then Jesus told them a story:

When you see a fig tree or any other tree putting out leaves, you know that summer will soon come. So, when you see these things happening, you know that God's kingdom will soon be here. You can be sure that some of the people of this generation will still be alive when all of this takes place. The sky and the earth won't last forever, but my words will. Don't spend all of your time thinking about eating or drinking or worrying about life. If you do, the final day will suddenly catch you like a trap. That day will surprise everyone on earth. Watch out and keep praying that you can escape all that is going to happen and that the Son of Man will be pleased with you.

Reflection

Like most ministers who have been in a charge for more than a year, I am faced with the task of saying something about Advent again without simply saying what I said last year..... although last year was unique in that online worship was all that was permitted!

Of course, some repetition is unavoidable. Hard to talk about Advent and Christmas without seeking to emphasize what matters most. What is Advent with its climax in Christmas about?

To say the obvious, Christmas has rich cultural meanings. It is the most widely-celebrated holiday in the world, even by many who are not Christian. At its best, its cultural meanings are about generosity, gift-giving, good will, and gatherings with family and friends. These are good things, even as the cultural commemoration of Christmas has virtually been swallowed up by commercialism. It is the spending season of the year. That has been lamented by many, so I will say no more about it.

The religious meaning of this season can include all of the above even as it adds a quite different emphasis. For Christians, Advent (as its Latin origins affirm) is about the coming of Jesus, in the past and the future. His first more than 2000 years ago when he was born into a historical life of humility and vulnerability; and his second in the future when he will return as judge of the living and the dead and establish God's kingdom on earth. The first is more emphasized. How many Christmas cards have you seen that highlight the second coming? Or Christmas hymns have you sung about his future return? There are some but not many.

The problem with the Christian meaning of Advent and Christmas is not primarily commercialism, though that affects many. Rather, Advent and Christmas have virtually been swallowed up by the miraculous. The angel Gabriel comes to the virgin Mary and tells her she will conceive without the involvement of a human father. Prophets foretell such a birth, and even its location in Bethlehem, despite Mary and Joseph living in Nazareth. A special star moves with the precision of a global-positioning device to lead wise scholars from the east to the place of Jesus's birth. Angels sing in the night sky to shepherds. These are the themes of Christmas cards, hymns, manger scenes, concerts, and pageants.

To be candid, I do not think that any of this happened. Of course, there is some historical memory in the stories. Jesus was born. He really lived. He was Jewish. His parents' names were Mary and Joseph. They lived in Nazareth, a very small peasant village, perhaps as small as a few hundred. But I do not think that there was an annunciation by an angel to Mary, or a virginal conception, or a special star, or wise scholars from the East visiting the infant Jesus, or angels filling the night with glory as they sang to shepherds.

Yet I am not a "debunker" of these stories. I do not dismiss them as "fables" or "fabrications" or "falsehoods." Many in the modern world do see the two options as "it happened this way" or "it didn't" – and if it didn't, then we are dealing with delusions and deceptions. A few years ago, a television special on these stories posed the question that way: are they "fact or fable"?

There is a third option. Namely, the Christmas stories with their miraculous elements were not intended to be "factual" in the sense of reporting what actually happened.

Rather, they are early Christian testimony, written roughly a hundred years after Jesus's birth. They testify to the **significance** that Jesus had come to have in their lives and experience and thought. The stories are parables, metaphorical narratives that can be true without being factual.

He was for them, in imagery from the birth stories themselves, the light in the darkness, the new Moses who confronts a new Pharaoh, the fulfilment of ancient Israel's and humanity's hopes and yearnings, the way of return from exile, the Spirit and Word of God revealed and embodied in a human life.

That is the testimony of the stories of Advent and Christmas. To make their truth dependent upon the factuality of the miraculous as some Christians and some rejecters do is mistaken. It distorts what they are about. Advent and Christmas are about the biblical hope and way, the path, to a new kind of world. They are about our rebirth and the world's rebirth.

To those Christians who insist that the miraculous parts of the Christmas stories really happened, I gently and respectfully ask, "What is lost by letting go of that?" And, "Is anything gained by thinking of these elements in the stories as affirmations of the significance of Jesus?" That he and what happened through him is "of God"? Does the truth of Christmas depend upon the "happenedness" of the miraculous? Or is its truth more-than-factual? For me, the answer is clear. For me as a Christian, Jesus is light in the darkness, the path of liberation, the way of return, the Word of God and Spirit of God embodied in a human life. In him we see love's passion for a different kind of world. That's what his coming and Christmas are about.

Prayer

As we begin our preparations for Christmas, we give thanks for the gift of life of every child and for the promise of potential that each child possesses. Within each child are gifts and potential, which adults are meant to nurture and encourage. We are grateful that many children have families and friends, people who nurture and care for them.

But we know that too many children are torn from their families and friends and are left isolated and uncared for.

We pray for children today who are apart from their families, who are struggling to get by. We pray for the agencies and people involved in helping them and are grateful for all they do.

We are grateful that many children have access to education and healthcare, that they have opportunities to grow and develop to live life to the full.

We pray for children today, who do not have this access, who do not have the same opportunities to grow and develop to live life to the full.

We are thankful for the work of charities and organisations who try to help these children and who seek to eradicate poor education and healthcare.

We delight in our children and long for them all to be happy and healthy, we pray for the health and wellbeing of all children today,

here at home and all around the world. May we be aware of situations and circumstances where we can help another child and may the Spirit guide us to them.

Blessing

May we find each other in the silence between the words.
May we heal the loneliness of our expertise with the wisdom of our service. May we honour
in ourselves and all others
the deep and simple impulse to live,
to find sacred space and open land.
May we remember that the yearning to be holy is a part of everyone
and the only hope for the next thousand years.

May you stay safe in the *Way of Christ*, and may you be blessed by his Spirit this day
and always.