

Readings, Reflections and Prayers for the Advent Season 2021

(Thursday afternoons at 3 pm on Zoom, on 2, 9, 16 and 23 December, continuing on 30 December and 6 January to Epiphany)

Selection by Sylvia Pick, read by Philipa and Sylvia

Readings for Thursday after Christmas Day

Almighty God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin: Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen



Connie Imboden 1988

Judith Wright, *Woman to Child*

You who were darkness warmed my flesh
where out of darkness rose the seed.
Then all the world I made in me:
all the world you hear and see
hung upon my dreaming blood.

There moved the multitudinous stars,
and coloured birds and fishes moved.
There swam the sliding continents.
All time lay rolled in me, and sense,
and love that knew not its beloved.

O node and focus of the world -
I hold you deep within that well
you shall escape and not escape -
that mirrors still your sleeping shape,
that nurtures still your crescent cell.

I wither and you break from me:
yet though you dance in living light,
I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit,
the link that joins you to the night.

Luke 2:8 - 20, KJ Bible

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us.

And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told to them.

James Kirkup, *The Eve of Christmas*

It was the evening before the night
That Jesus turned from dark to light.

Joseph was walking round and round
And yet he moved not on the ground.

He looked into the heavens, and saw
The pole stood silent, star on star.

He looked into the forest: there
The leaves hung dead upon the air.

He looked into the sea, and found
It frozen, and the lively fishes bound.

And in the sky, the birds that sang
Not in feathered clouds did hang.

Said Joseph : 'What is this silence all?'
An angel spoke: 'It is no thrall,

But is a sign of great delight:
The Prince of Love is born this night.'

And Joseph said: 'Where may I find
This wonder?' - 'He is all mankind,

Look, he is both farthest, nearest,
Highest and lowest, of all men the dearest.'

Then Joseph moved, and found the stars
Moved with him, and the evergreen airs,

The birds went flying, and the main
Flowed with its fishes once again.

And everywhere they went, they cried:
'Love lives, when all had died!'

In Excelsis Gloria!

Aurelius Prudentius (348 - 405) *Hymn* Trs. J.M.Neale (1816-1866) et al

Of the Father's love begotten,
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of all things that are and have been
and that future years shall see:
evermore and evermore.

By his word was all created ;
he commanded, it was done:
heav'n and earth and depths of ocean,
universe of three and one,
all that grows beneath the shining
of the light of moon and sun:
evermore and evermore.

Blessed was that day for ever,
when the Virgin, full of grace,
by the Spirit's pow'r conceiving,
bore the Saviour of our race;
and the child, the world's Redeemer,
first revealed his sacred face:
Evermore and evermore.

Ted Schmidt (B.1939) *The Unspeakable New*

When the angels had gone from them into heaven,
the shepherds said, 'Let us go to Bethlehem
to see this thing which has happened.'

Luke's story still jolts

What he says is this:

The first people to gaze upon Novelty,
to see another Chance in a world grown weary -
were the Dalits of religious Palestine,
Jews who worked the midnight shift
and so could not observe the Mosaic laws!
Isn't it ironic, delightful?
Jewish humour, even then:
shepherds, losers, forgotten ones,

unable to keep dietary laws
or attend the synagogue,
poor men, invisible to Rome
forgotten by Jerusalem,
waiting
waiting
ready to be summoned, called to themselves.

Priest, Levite, Pharisee, Sadducee, Roman: all blind
all imposing limited vision on a grace-filled universe.
The shepherd first sees.

Are we ready for the unspeakable New?
Or are we resigned to the weary, the worn out,
locked into a determined cosmos
where there are no surprises?
We believe Novelty comes, always comes,
breaking us, remaking us.
Are we ready? Fine.
Let us go the Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened.



Moonlight, a Landscape with Sheep', Samuel Palmer, c.1831-3

U.A. Fanthorpe, *The Sheepdog*

After the very bright light,
And the talking bird, And the singing,
And the sky filled up wi' wings,
And then the silence.

Our lads sez
'We'd better go, then.
Stay, Shep. Good dog, stay."
So I stayed wi't' sheep.

After they cum back,
It sounded grand, what they'd seen:
Camels, and kings, and such,
Wi' presents - human sort,
Not the kind you eat -
And a baby. Presents wes for him.
Our lads took him a lamb.

I had to stay behind wi' sheep.
Pity they didn't tek me along, too,
I'm good wi' sheep,
And the baby might have liked a dog
After all that myrrh and such.

George Herbert , *Christmas*

All after pleasures as I rid one day,
My horse and I, both tired, body and mind,
With full cry of affections, quite astray;
I took up in the next Inn I could find.

There when I came, whom found I but my dear,
My dearest Lord, expecting till the grief
Of pleasures brought me to him, ready there
To be all passengers' most sweet relief?

O thou, whose glorious, yet contracted light,
Wrapt in night's mantle, stole into a manger;
Since my dark soul, and brutish is thy right,
To man of all beasts be not thou a stranger:
Furnish and deck my soul, that thou may'st have
A better lodging, than a rack, or grave.

The shepherds sing; and should I silent be?
My God, no hymn for thee?
My soul's a shepherd too: a flock it feeds
Of thoughts, and words and deeds.
The pasture is thy word; the streams thy grace
Enriching all the place.

Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
Out-sing the daylight hours.
Then we will chide the Sun for letting night
Take up his place and right:
We sing one common Lord; wherefore he should
Himself the candle hold.

I will go searching, till I find a Sun
Shall stay, till we have done;
A willing shiner, that shall shine as gladly,
As frost-nipt Suns look sadly.
Then will we sing, and shine all our own day,
And one another pay:

His beams shall cheer my breast, and both so twine,
Till even his beams sing, and my music shine.

Eleanor Farjeon, *This Holy Night*

God bless this holy night,
And all within it;
God bless the candle that you light
To Midnight's minute
The board at which you break your bread,
The cup you drink of:
The warming fire, the bed of rest,
The ringing laughter:
These things, and all things else be blest
From floor to rafter
This Holy night, from a dark to light,
Even more than other;
And, if you have no house tonight,
God bless you, brother.



Matthew Rozeik 1997

Clive Sansom, *The Innkeeper's Wife*

I love this byre. Shadows are kindly here.
The light is flecked with travelling stars of dust.
So quiet it seems after the inn clamour,
Scraping of fiddles and the stamping feet.
Only the cows, each in her patient box,
Turn their slow eyes, as we and the sunlight enter,
Their slowly rhythmic mouths.
'That is the stall,
Carpenter. You see it's too far gone
For patching or repatching. My husband made it,
And he's been gone these dozen years or more...'

Strange how this lifeless thing, degraded wood
Split from the tree and nailed and crucified
To make a wall, outlives the mastering hand
That struck it down, the warm firm hand
That touched my body with its wandering love.
'No, let the fire take them. Strip every board

And make a new beginning. Too many memories lurk
Like worms in this old wood. That piece you're holding -
that patch of grain with the giant's thumbprint -
I stared at it a full hour when he died:
Its grooves are down my mind. And that board there
Baring its knot-hole like a missing jig-saw -
I remember another hand along its rim.
No, not my husband's, and why I should remember
I cannot say. It was a night in winter.
Our house was full, tight packed as salted herrings -
So full, they said, we had to hold our breaths
To close the door and shut the night-air out!

Two travellers came. They stood outside
Across the threshold, half in the ring of light
And half beyond it. I would have let them in
Despite the crowding - the woman was past her time -
But I'd no mind to argue with my husband,
The flagon in my hand and half the inn
Still clamouring for wine. But when trade slackened,
And all our guests had sung themselves to bed
Or told the floor their troubles, I came out here
Where he had lodged them. The man was standing
As you are now, his hand smoothing that board. -
He was a carpenter, I heard them say.
She rested on the straw, and on her arm
A child was lying. None of your creased-faced brats
Squalling their lungs out. Just lying there
As calm as a new-dropped calf - his eyes wide open,
And gazing around round as if the world he saw
In the chaff-strewn light of the stable lantern
Was something beautiful and new and strange.
Ah well, he'll have learned different now, I reckon,
Wherever he is. And why I should recall
A scene like that, when times I would remember
Have passed beyond reliving, I cannot think.
It's a trick you're served by old possessions:
They have their memories too - too many memories.

Well, I must goin, There are meals to serve
Join us there, Carpenter, when you've had enough
Of cattle-company. The world is a sad place,
But wine and music blunt the truth of it.

Jacopone da Todi, Franciscan c.1230 - 25 December 1306

Love, thou didst enter very softly in
To hold this heart of mine
No sound, no stir, no sign!
How couldst thou cross my threshold all unseen?

O love thou fire divine of laughter spun;
Love that art smile and jest,
Thou giv'st us of thy best,
Thy wealth unmeasured that is never done.

O sweet and gentle love, thou art the key
of heaven's city and fort:
Steer then my ship to port,
And from the tempest's fury shelter me.