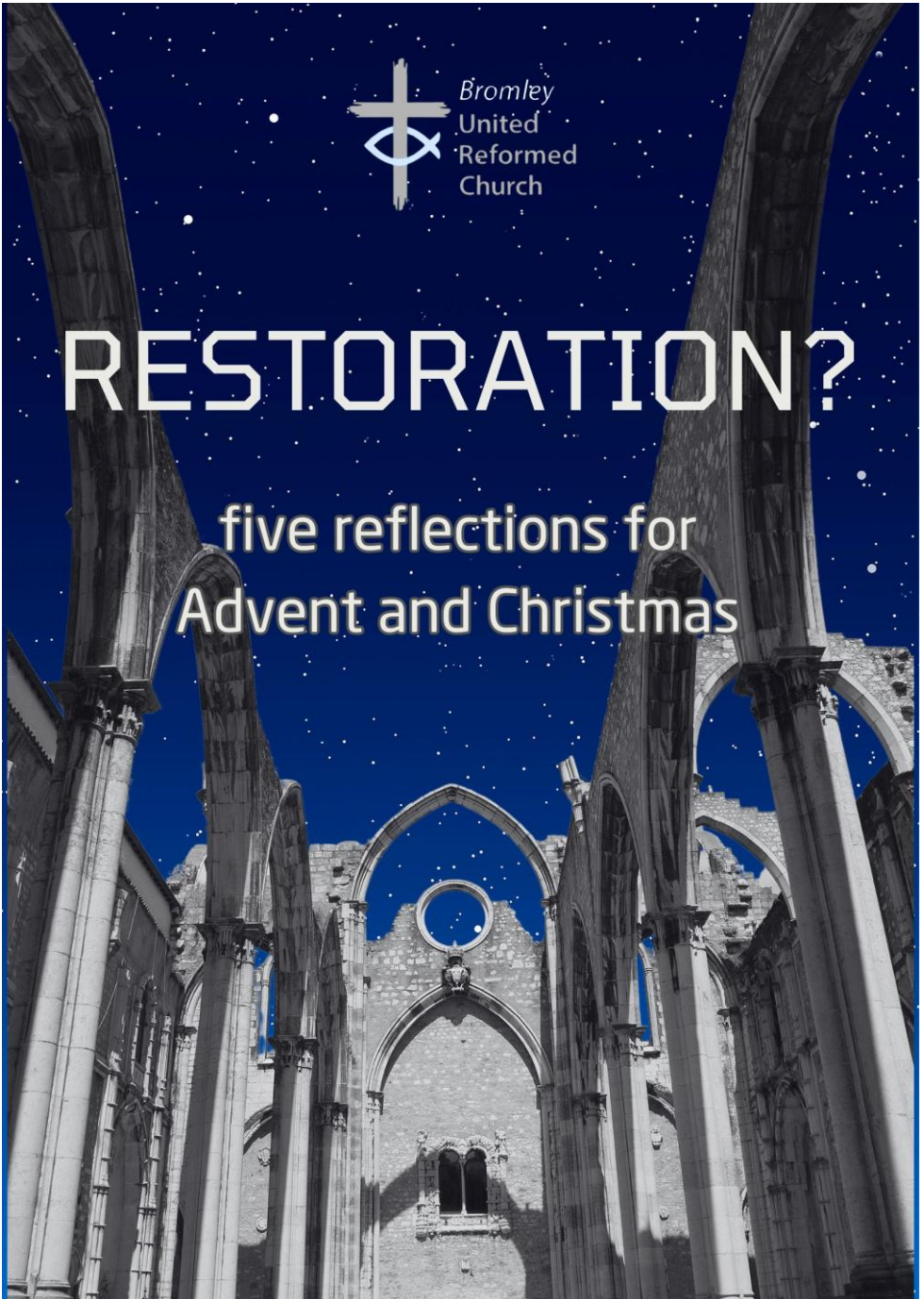




Bromley
United
Reformed
Church

RESTORATION?

five reflections for
Advent and Christmas



There is so much in the world and in our lives that feels broken. There are relationships and fortunes that are in need of repair. There is a want for restoration of nations and people. Yet, when we look for healing, rebuilding or restoration in ours and the world's lives, what is it that we are seeking?

During the season of Advent, the church is not only looking towards the birth of Jesus; it is also looking for Jesus's return. It is preparing for when, finally, the kingdom of God is restored. What that means for the church comes in many shapes and forms, as it did for the Jewish people at the time when Jesus was born, despite it being centred on Jesus Christ. Therefore, this booklet offers five reflections—one for each week of Advent and one for Christmas day—holding the importance of Jesus as “God with us” central to the restoration of the world. These reflections, however, also hold what God always intended for the world from the beginning—to be in relationship with Godself.

If you would like an audio-visual version of these reflections, please check out our YouTube or Facebook pages.

www.youtube.com/@bromleyURC

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The Antiphons used in the reflections are ancient liturgical texts used over the last seven days of Advent. They have been taken from the Advent carol “O Come, O come Emmanuel” (Jubilate Hymns version), and as translated in Malcolm Guite's “Sounding the Season.” Unless otherwise stated, all other material has been written and/or compiled by Elaine Colechin (minister of Bromley United Reformed Church) and Stephen Fellingham (Local Church Leader of Bromley United Reformed Church).

ADVENT 1

*Rejoice, rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.*

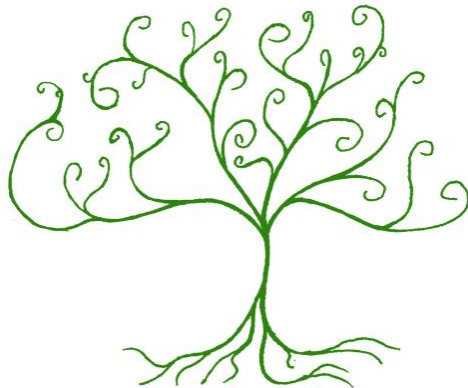
ANTIPHON

O come, true branch of Jesse, free
your children from this tyranny;
from depths of hell your people save
to rise victorious from the grave.

PRAYER

We come to you, God,
rejoicing because of Jesus Christ
who came to be in our midst
to show us your saving grace.

Yet, in this season,
we look again for your coming
for this world needs to know you over
so it may be restored
to what you intended, in the beginning,
a place of justice, love and peace.



SCRIPTURE READING Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

REFLECTION

Be it government or sovereign ruler, nations need leaders. We might dream of a world where there is no hierarchy and society is built on fairness and mutual trust, but the reality is that without GOOD leadership, the world is in chaos.

Hear the emphasis? The world does not just need leaders. Those who would lead need to be upright, trustworthy and fair. Their interest should be in the people they serve not in themselves.

The word of God that came to an exiled people through the prophet Jeremiah points to such a leader. For the fortunes of people to be reversed, they needed a leader who be the exact opposite to every leader and king they had had before—one who would truly practice justice and be fair. Without such a leader, the nations would never be restored; the land would not be healed and the city of Jerusalem saved. And God promised to raise up that individual.

Now, in democracies, when new leadership is required and trust in the current regime is low, there is a trend which shifts the leadership away from those who have held the political power for a long time. It makes logical sense, because even if you are only voting for a person, they carry the same political baggage as their predecessor of the same political party. God's

promise to the people of Israel and Judah, though, was not to raise up a leader from a new household or tribe. The one who would execute justice and be righteous would be from the dynasty who had caused all the people's woes. Their hope of restoration was to rest in a sovereign who would be weighed down by the sins of their forebears.

As we look at the leaders of the world, and maybe regret the vote we cast at the ballot box, lessons of history seem far from those leaders and our minds. Yet, for the healing of nations and the world as a whole, leaders cannot focus only on the here and now, or even the immediate past. They have to look back and own the mistakes of their dynasties. It is the only way that good can come from bad.

ANTIPHON

O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples;
before you kings will shut their mouths,
to you the nations will make their prayer:
come and deliver us, and delay no longer.

PRAYER

Sovereign God, you raise up leaders among us;
you call people to hold offices of responsibility,
to strive to build more just and fair communities and nations.

We pray for all those who hold offices of such power.

May your wisdom rise within them,
opening their eyes to the downfalls of the past
and the interest of those whom you have called them to serve.

May the hope of restoration,
planted by the words spoken by the prophets,
be reignited within the nations,

not only in the search for one who saves
but in our reliance on you
who has and will deliver your people
through Jesus Christ. Amen

*Rejoice, rejoice! The one who saves comes!
On that day, the people will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation will not lift sword against nation,
and they will learn war no more.*

based on Isaiah 2:4

ADVENT 2

Rejoice, rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

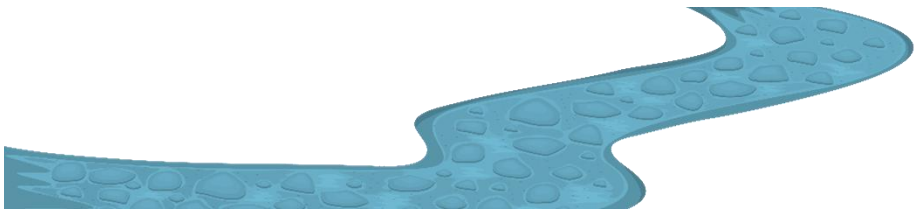
ANTIPHON

O come, true Wisdom from on high
who orders all to mind and eye:
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in her ways to grow.

PRAYER

We come to you, God,
rejoicing because of Jesus Christ
who came to be in our midst
to show us your saving grace.

Yet, in this season,
we look again for your coming
for this world needs to know you over
so it may be restored
to what you intended, in the beginning,
a place of justice, love and peace.



SCRIPTURE READING Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can

endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

REFLECTION

As we look towards the second Sunday in Advent we have moved from Jeremiah's quiet little picture of the coming Messiah as a Righteous Branch to the roaring furnace of a silver refiner or the alkaline churning of a commercial launderette.

These jarring images remind us that Advent is not about preparing for a "merry little Christmas." The route to restoration is tough. Advent is about warning, about judgment, about repentance, about a refiner's fire and a launderer's rough hands. This is a very tough passage to read and many of us would perhaps prefer to skip over it. But the Gospel reading from Luke 3 is precisely about John the Baptist, the loud voice in the wilderness who prepared the way for the Lord with ferocious calls to repentance - to restore their relationship with God and with their fellow humans. How to find good news from such hard texts.

The answer perhaps lies in discerning the hard background that led God to speak in such jarring ways. That background is summed up in the question at the beginning of this passage, a question that the Lectionary has unfortunately cut off. Our passage should really begin with Malachi 2:17 "Where is the

God of justice?” Israel had asked that question so many times that God was weary of it.

Why would Israel repeat that question ad nauseam? Because it seemed to them that God favoured the wicked while the righteous suffered, which produced a prolonged religious malaise. No longer trusting God’s justice and doubting his covenant love, these post-exilic Jews began to lose hope. The reality of their lives seemed all wrong to Israel, so they incessantly whined, “Where is the God of justice?”

And God speaks through Malachi. His words were shocking to hear. When the forerunner and the Messiah finally come, they will bring judgment and justice, but it will be visited upon Israel. This is a necessary prelude to restoration. You cry out for God’s justice, God says, but when it comes, “Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?” He will come, not to comfort, but to cleanse, “for he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.” The Lord will focus his attention not on your enemies, but on you. And, if we are being honest could/should we replace the word Israel in what you have just read or heard with the word ‘us’?

That message was addressed to ancient Israel, but if the Lectionary is right in applying these words to John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, then they must also apply to us. Jesus did not come only to comfort, but also to cleanse. Though he brought the forgiveness of sin, he also wants to rid us of those forgiven sins. That is not a pleasant prospect, but it is precisely what we keep asking for. “Where is the God of justice?” Now we know—up there on the cross and down here in the fire. As we look back at his first coming and ahead to his second coming in this season of Advent, we must ask how Jesus wants to purify us.

ANTIPHON

O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,
reaching from one end to the other mightily,
and sweetly ordering all things:
come and teach us the way of prudence.

PRAYER

See, You come,
preparing the way for grace
to restore our souls;
holding us in Your heart
when we have lost our way.

See, You come, exchanging poverty's wretched landscape
with grace's riches;
tearing down the cruelty of
oppression;
straightening out the paths
we make the needy walk;
soothing the lonely nights
of rough sleepers.

See, You come, forcing us to see
the suffering around us,
so that we might share mercy;
in observing the struggles of others,
we might give offerings of justice;
in noticing the silence of leaders,
we would cry out for hope.

based on a prayer by T. Shuman

*Rejoice, rejoice! The one who comes!
On that day, the people will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation will not lift sword against nation,
and they will learn war no more.*

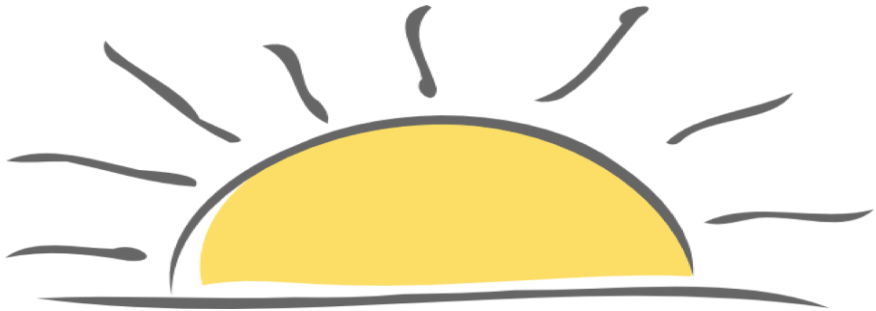
ADVENT 3

Rejoice, rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

ANTIPHON

O come, bright Daystar, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
dispel the long night's lingering gloom
and pierce the shadows of the tomb.



PRAYER

We come to you, God,
rejoicing because of Jesus Christ
who came to be in our midst
to show us your saving grace.

Yet, in this season,
we look again for your coming
for this world needs to know you over
so it may be restored
to what you intended, in the beginning,
a place of justice, love and peace.

SCRIPTURE READING Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

The Lord has taken away the judgements against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.

And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.

At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

REFLECTION

As the party season enters full swing, all that is wrong within the world does seem to melt away with the glitter and cheer. The fast-approaching new year offers a fresh start. Joy and hope appear to replace fear and worry. Yet, for how many is this just fleeting? For how many would a quick puff of north wind blow all the glitter away?

Advent is a time when we are encouraged to look towards better times. In the words of the prophet Zephaniah, we have the picture of what the restoration for a nation could be like: a home coming beyond all imagination. For a people who have suffered much, though, this rebuilding of fortunes is not to be tied up in buildings and wealth. It is about relationships and love.

On the pages of the prophecy of Zephaniah, we come face-to-face with the warrior God who turns on the people of Judah among others. As an act of judgement, it was foretold that not just land and status would be lost, life itself would be! Utter destruction and desolation born out of wrath and disillusion. Not something one might expect of God. Yet, Zephaniah's prophecy does not end there. It is not all doom and gloom; there is hope! God's wrath will not last, it will be but fleeting and the catalyst for renewal!

Ultimately, the victory of the warrior God in the prophecy of Zephaniah is over the anger of God. God stands in the midst of the people and, despite the anger and despair, sees that only love will rebuild what had been lost.

There is no dressing it up, relationships fail and leave a vacuum of pain. Yet, that does not have to be the end of the story. It is possible to conquer in oneself the need for retribution and turn it into something that is positive and affirming. As God

demonstrates, one's energy can be better used when not invested in punishment.

ANTIPHON

O Dayspring,
splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness:
come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness
and the shadow of death.

PRAYER

Forgiving God, you know the anger and pain
that broken relationships bring:
the accusations of blame;
the want of justification;
the craving for a reckoning.

Yet, you know that an outpouring of wrath
does not bring peace;
it only fuels a fire that prolongs everyone's suffering.

In those dark days
of shattered hopes and dream,
let your light break in
illuminating a way ahead
that is not encapsulated by sadness
but driven by love
for you to us through Jesus Christ. Amen

*Rejoice, rejoice! The one who comes!
On that day, the people will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation will not lift sword against nation,
and they will learn war no more.*

ADVENT 4

*Rejoice, rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come you, O Israel.*

ANTIPHON

King of the Nations, come, embrace
and unify the human race;
command our sad division cease
and be for us the Prince of Peace.

PRAYER

We come to you, God,
rejoicing because of Jesus Christ
who came to be in our midst
to show us your saving grace.

Yet, in this season,
we look again for your coming
for this world needs to know you over
so it may be restored
to what you intended, in the beginning,
a place of justice, love and peace.



SCRIPTURE READING Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return

to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

REFLECTION

This is such a joy filled prophecy - restoration is coming! - BUT we cannot ignore that the happy news here is nestled in some sad news.

Micah's prediction of a ruler who would be Peace incarnate gains in brilliance and in realism when we see that he has to speak this promise right in the middle of a dark prediction of Israel's impending military defeat and the suffering it would bring.

But then again, when CAN WE EVER speak of the Prince of Peace who is Christ the Lord without doing so from a context of surrounding darkness? When can we proclaim the gospel without having to do so in ways that stand in tension with the pain and suffering that are not just all around us in the wider world but that are quite literally right in front of us on any given day? This is especially true of Advent 2024. Our world is gripped by fear and is engaged in what looks like a never-ending warfare with the most appalling atrocities being inflicted on defenceless victims. Can the Prince of Peace be celebrated in a world at war? Of course. This is WHY we celebrate God's Christ. We speak into that pain, not despite it. We hardly need reminders of the darkness that surrounds us. What we do often need, though, is an honest acknowledgment of that painful darkness.

Micah has a hard word for his audience here, and although he also provides an incredibly bright promise in the midst of it all, only those who can understand and (ultimately) experience the difficult parts of Micah's message can we appreciate just how luminous the promise is, too.

People need hope, we think. They need grace. They need direction. But we do people no favours by relegating suffering to something long ago and far away. Few times of the year tempt us more in that direction, however, than Advent and Christmas. But it's a temptation to resist at this time above all times. If Christ cannot be incarnated into our real world and into our real families and all the hurts we know so well, then Hallmark wins and the whole season is a false bright spot in the midst of the surrounding darkness. If we do that Advent/Christmas is a season that comes and goes but without much lasting effect on anyone.

Only if Christ Jesus the Lord, who is our Peace, can enter our darkness so as to make an everlasting change in our condition does the season have any meaning worth talking about. Let's not let bad news that precedes and proceeds this passage in Micah have the last word. By no means! But let's not disallow it from having any word, either.

Three years ago, when we were last in the Year C Lectionary cycle, Advent came as we had just gone through the Covid crisis and just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This year we are still reeling from that continuing war and the tragedy that is happening in the Middle East. There is a reason God had to go so far as to incarnate himself into this world to save it. The problem of evil is THAT bad, THAT tortured, THAT unresolvable from our side of things.

Immanuel means “God with us.” That’s the message we need. It also deepens the urgency of our call for that second Advent of our Lord: Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus. Come.

ANTIPHON

O King of the nations, and their desire,
the cornerstone making both one:
come and save the human race,
which you fashioned from clay.

PRAYER

How much we struggle to turn.
Even when we feel the pain
of the road we’re on,
we find it hard to admit it,
and to change course.

But, if we will just begin to dance,
to stop our single-minded marching
and allow the voice in the wilderness
to call the tune,
our dance will turn us
from despair to hope,
from destruction to creativity,
from emptiness and death to abundant life.

And so we pray,
for the leaders and the followers to dance together
for the able and the disabled to dance together
for the needy and the satisfied to dance together
for the whole and the broken to dance together
for the believer and the sceptic to dance together
for all creation and every creature to dance together
until the eternal dance turns us all
and brings us in step with you.

by John Van De Laar

*Rejoice, rejoice! The one who save comes!
On that day, the people will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation will not lift sword against nation,
and they will learn war no more.*

CHRISTMAS DAY

*Rejoice, rejoice!
Emmanuel is here for you, O Israel.*

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 2:8-14

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

CAROL

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see you lie!
Above the deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by;
yet in your dark streets is shining
the everlasting Light;
the hope and fears of all the years
are met in you tonight.



O sad and troubled Bethlehem,
we hear your longing cry
for peace and justice to be born
and cruel oppression die.
How deep your need for that great gift
of love in human form.
Let Christ in you be seen again
and hearts by hope made warm.

While morning stars and evening stars
shine out in your dark sky,
despair now stalks your troubled streets
where innocents still die.
And Jesus, born of Mary,
whose love will never cease,
feels even now your pain and fear,
longs with you for your peace.

Amazingly and lovingly
Jesus the child has come,
and, brought to birth through human pain,
makes broken hearts his home.
He comes to comfort all who weep,
to challenge every wrong
and, living with the weak and poor,
becomes their hope, their song.

v.1 Philip Brookes (1835-1893)
vv.2-4 Wendy Ross-Barker (b.1937)

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ,
we celebrate this day
the wonder of your birth;
praising God, that you are in our midst
and through you the world will know peace.

Yet, despite the songs we sing,
there is a sadness in our hearts—
the world still stands in ruin,
scarred by pain and malice.

Therefore, as we rejoice in your birth,
we pray for your presence to once again
become known among your people.

Mend the broken hearts;
Heal the broken lands;
Restore your broken people!

Let us not just have hope
that you will come and save us;
awaken us today to our part
in effecting change,
in making the world a place where you reign
with justice and peace, now and always. Amen

SCRIPTURE READING Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

CAROL

Hills of the north, rejoice,
river and mountain-spring,
hark to the advent voice;
valley and lowland sing.
Christ comes in righteousness and love,
he brings salvation from above.

Isles of the southern seas,
sing to the listening earth;
carry on every breeze
hope of a world's new birth:
in Christ shall all be made anew;
his word is sure, his promise true.

Land of the east, arise!
He is your brightest morn;
greet him with joyous eyes,
let praise his path adorn:
your seers have longed to know their Lord;
to you he comes, the final Word.

Shore of the utmost west,
lands of the setting sun,
welcome the heavenly guest
in whom the dawn has come:
he brings a never-ending light,
who triumphed o'er our darkest night.

Shout, as you journey on;
songs be in every mouth!
Lo, from the north they come,
from east and west and south:
in Jesus all shall find their rest,
in him the universe be blest.

Charles Ernest Oakley (1832-1865) and Editors of English Praise

*Rejoice, rejoice! The one who save has come!
Let us beat our swords into ploughshares
and our spears into pruning hooks;
let nation not lift sword against nation,
and learn war no more!*