

A Bare Christmas – A reflection for Advent 2020

Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus, Holy spirit, Blessed Trinity,
We offer ourselves and this time to you.
We place into your hands all that weighs heavy on our minds this night.
Give us your peace in our hearts so we may hear your voice
and bring us closer to your presence as we journey together
in reflection and prayer.

This we pray in Jesus name

Amen.

A Bare Christmas

When I set out to decide on an advent reflection for this year we were still uncertain as to what the arrangements for Christmas would be in relation to Covid 19. As it was then there was every chance that we would be unable to spend time with any family or friends and so it did indeed appear like it would feel like a very bare Christmas. We then found that this wasn't the case and we were permitted, albeit in a limited way, to hold celebrations in a reasonably normal way. However again things have been thrown up into the air as we find ourselves trying to suppress a 3rd wave and some people's hopes for Christmas have been devastated. Whilst things may be going ahead for some in a reasonably acceptable or even normal way, for others this may not be the case for a variety of reasons. Some have maybe lost loved ones this year or it may not be normal through financial difficulties, or it could be because people have made the decision that the risk is too great or have been forced by their tier level to stay at home when they had other plans. But regardless of what position we find ourselves in at present it feels that, for all of us, this Christmas still feels a little bare because in some way or another our lives have become stripped back from what we are used to, from what is 'normal'. And despite our attempts at Christmas celebrations whatever they may look like the shadow of Covid hangs over us with an uncertainty about what the effects will be of permitting some traditional Christmas celebration to take place and what the future may hold as a result. And this may be muting our joy and festive cheer, making Christmas feel a little bare.

But actually the journey through 2020 and the current predicament we find ourselves in gives us the opportunity to enter into our advent reflection and the Christmas story from a slightly different place to our comfortable norm.

So what does a bare Christmas mean?

To help us think about this we must first think about what comes to mind when we hear the word bare. So, I invite you to close your eyes for a few moments and think on the word bare. Not in relation to Christmas so much, although you may wish to, but the word bare in general. What images come into your mind. What other words speak to you that give an idea of what bare looks and feels like. You may wish to spend some time in silence thinking or you might find it helpful to write the words or draw the images as they come to your mind.





This year has felt bare, stripped of the things we enjoy, stripped of the human contact we are used to and need, stripped of certainty and safety, it has been stripped and made bare. It has been what you might call a desolate year in so many ways. It has at times felt like walking through a wilderness, it has felt at times that the barrenness of the year has left us struggling to keep hope, it has made us ask more keenly the big questions; Who is God? Where is he or she? Why is this happening? When will it end? How will it end? Will it end? We have felt exposed by our vulnerability to something we don't understand, we have felt lost as to how to cope with the drastic changes in our way of being so much so that even when we have been with people we may still have felt alone, life has still felt bare at times.

As we dwell in the words that have come to mind as we have considered what it means to be bare, we listen to some passages of scripture. As you listen to the scripture there may be a particular word or phrase that stands out to you, if so, in the few minutes of silence that follow focus on that word or phrase, if not you may just wish to sit quietly and contemplate the passage as a whole or use one of the words that came to mind to focus on.

Genesis 18:11-15, 21:1-3

¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

²¹The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. ²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.

Pause in silence for contemplation for 4-6 minutes or for however long feels comfortable to you

Exodus 16:1-8, 13-15

¹⁶The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." ⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" ⁸And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but" against the Lord.

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

Pause in silence for contemplation for 4-6 minutes or for however long feels comfortable to you

Isaiah 55: 1-5

⁵⁵Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you

Pause in silence for contemplation for 4-6 minutes or for however long feels comfortable to you

Lamentations 3:19-33

¹⁹The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! ²⁰My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.

²¹But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: ²²The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; ²³they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” ²⁵The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. ²⁶It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. ²⁷It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, ²⁸to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, ²⁹to put one’s mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), ³⁰to give one’s cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. ³¹For the Lord will not reject forever. ³²Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; ³³for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

Pause in silence for contemplation for 4-6 minutes or for however long feels comfortable to you

Psalm 22

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

³Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

⁶But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.

⁷All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

⁸“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”

⁹Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.

¹⁰On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

¹¹Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

Pause in silence for contemplation for 4-6 minutes or for however long feels comfortable to you



Look at the image of this bare Christmas tree for a few moments and think about the words you've been considering and the passages you've been reflecting upon.

Read through the following reflection slowly, pausing after each paragraph to think on the words.

A bare Christmas tree, symbolic of how we might feel this year to have been or maybe symbolic of how we feel right now, or indeed of how we might expect Christmas to be. No sparkle, no glitz, no majesty or glory.

And yet as we look upon the story of the first Christmas with fresh eyes, we notice the bareness in which it took place.

A young girl, Mary, a virgin, no one special, not royal or powerful but simple and plain, unremarkable, bare if you like.

Joseph also plain and simple, a carpenter by trade, no one of any consequence, basic, unremarkable, bare if you like.

They are forced to travel to Bethlehem, away from their home, from safety and security with everything they need to a place where although there are plenty of buildings, there is nowhere for them to stay, their searching for an inn is fruitless, for them Bethlehem is desolate, unwelcoming, barren, bare if you like.

And then the place that they find for shelter, the place for the baby to be born, an animal shelter, most probably the lower floor of a house, but traditionally a stable. No matter, the significance is the place, it is not a palace as the wise men expected to find a new born king, no this place is also desolate, void of comfort, basic and exposed, bare if you like.

And then those chosen to be the first visitors to the baby, not royalty or dignitaries but shepherds, the outcasts of society, those who would apparently come empty handed with nothing to offer a new born king, bare if you like.

And at the end of a stripped back and bare year, we face a stripped back and bare Christmas maybe bringing us heartbeat closer to a clearer recognition of the darkness of the world, our own fragility, and the bareness of our lives, a heartbeat closer into the bareness of the first Christmas.

And yet into that dark and bare first Christmas he came. God stepped down from heaven to earth and filled the story and the world with light and joy in abundance. All that was bare was adorned with the glory of God so much so that all that was bare and insignificant became more significant than anyone could ever have imagined. Without the Christ child, without Jesus, the story is bare, but with him it is filled with the love of God and becomes more glorious than our imaginations allow.

To strip back Christmas, to make it bare, is to see it in it's full majesty and glory. It allows us to focus on the one thing which really brings the joy and light into our lives at this time of year, it's not that the other things we cherish don't matter, just as it isn't that Mary and Joseph, Bethlehem, the manger and the shepherds don't matter, but all of this only matters, they only matter, because they are reflecting his light. Christmas as we know it can be stripped back, it can be made as bare as can be, but the glory we see and the joy we feel will never be reduced, because Jesus entered into the bareness of this world, he enters into the bareness of our lives and he fills it with his eternal light and his immense love for us.

'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness shall never overcome it!.' *John 1:5*



Due to copyright and performance rights I am unable to stream Psalm 80 by the sons of Korah, however I have put a link (below) on the website for you to listen to it if you wish before we enter a time of prayer. If you are unable to access it then please read psalm 80 'Prayer for Israel's restoration.'

Psalm 80

¹Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

²before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

³Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁴O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

⁶You make us the scorn of our neighbours; our enemies laugh among themselves.

⁷Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁸You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.

⁹You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.

¹⁰The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches;

¹¹it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.

¹²Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

¹³The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.

¹⁴Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine,

¹⁵the stock that your right hand planted.

¹⁶They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.

¹⁷But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.

¹⁸Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

¹⁹Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Continuing our theme of bareness, you are invited in this time of prayer to remove your shoes or slippers and socks, so that your feet are bare during this time prayer.

God instructed Moses to remove his sandals, so his feet would be bare, for the ground on which he was standing was holy, he was in the presence of God. And so we recognise that as we pray we too are in the presence of God and are indeed we are standing on holy ground with our feet and our hearts bare.

Time of prayer and praise

We walk together through a land of darkness as a people of hope.

We walk together through a land of deep darkness guided by the light of our Lord.

Out of the wilderness we cry to you Lord.

Lord hear our voice.

We offer to you all that we have and all that we are.

Lord accept our praise.

I wait for the LORD,
my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.

I am counting on the LORD;
yes, I am counting on him.
I have put my hope in his word.

I wait for the LORD;
my soul does wait,
and in His word I put my hope.

Psalm 130:5

The Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Silence

Lord Jesus, gives eyes to see your light

When life seems bare

Lord Jesus give us eyes to see your light

When we feel we walk in darkness

Lord Jesus give us eyes to see your light

When we feel lost in a wilderness

Lord Jesus give us eyes to see your light

When there are people who feel like their life is bare

Help us lord to show them your light

When there are people walking in darkness

Help us Lord to show them your light

When there are people lost in the wilderness

Help us Lord to show them your light.

Lord Jesus, help us to know you are with us always.

Help us to wait patiently and faithfully for you coming

Give us your strength as we weather the storm, strong in the knowledge that you came to the world as a baby at Christmas because you love us.

Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory
for ever and ever.
Amen.

God's blessing

The LORD bless *us* and keep *us*;
The LORD make his face to shine upon *us* and be gracious to *us*;
The LORD lift up his countenance upon *us* and give *us* peace.