

Carols by Candlelight 2021  
St John's and livestreamed  
**God's indescribable gift**

From ten minutes beforehand – on the organ, gentle arrangement of Christmas carols.

Hello everyone, and welcome to our special carols by candlelight service – our traditional carol service. Thank you for coming this afternoon at the very darkest time of the year. Thank you for coming even in the midst of the regulations and restrictions. Thank you for coming to worship God today, to thank him for his Christmas gift of light, life and salvation in Jesus.

Our theme for today's worship is God's indescribable gift, a quote from the second letter to the Corinthian church. It is also the theme in our Christmas leaflet and in the little tree decorations and Christmas cards we have given to members of the church family here at St John's and our sister church at St David's.

Last year we were unable to sing at this service because of the covid regulations. This year we can sing, but only from behind our masks and seated so that we don't throw our breath over people nearby. But we are allowed to sing and we are going to sing. Let's start by singing "O come, all ye faithful".

StF212 O come all ye faithful (v1, v2, v5)

Gracious and loving God, we come this afternoon to worship you.  
We want to thank you again this Christmas for the priceless gift of your generosity.

To a world full of darkness you gave Jesus,  
the light of your life, given to bring light to the world.

Father God, we want to thank you again this Christmas  
for the priceless gift of your hospitality.

To a world full of loneliness you gave Jesus,  
God with us, the Word made flesh and living among us.

Caring God, we want to thank you again this Christmas  
for all those who seek to imitate your generosity and hospitality.

Thank you for those who give at Christmas,  
not just to those they know and love  
but to those who are most in need,  
for those who give practical gifts of water, food, clothing and shelter  
but also priceless gifts of respect, hope, peace, joy and love.

Jesus, help us love as you love.

Father God, we want to thank you again this Christmas that with your Spirit's help, we too can become extravagant givers. Thank you for giving us, a people seeking to love like you, not just nice notions but a clear example we can follow in the words and actions of Jesus, who tells us that we are giving to him when we give love to one another in his name.

Father God, we thank you once again for your supreme gift of love in Jesus. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

You will remember that I said that our theme for this afternoon is God's indescribable gift. It is a quote from 2 Cor. 9:15 where St Paul says, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" The thing is though, if the gift is indescribable then how do we know what it is and how can we give thanks for it?! So, I am going to try to describe the indescribable gift to you this afternoon, by taking you through the story of God's interactions with humanity, with us.

The very first gift God gave to the world was to make it in the first place. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1) And he filled it with good things and he saw that what he had made was very good. He was pleased.

The world was beautiful and lovely and the very first humans lived in unity and close intimacy with God. The trouble is, it didn't stay that way. Humanity decided that it was going to go its own way. Of course, we always think we know better, don't we. We even think we know better than God himself. How ridiculous. But that's the way we are, selfish, self-centred and arrogant and stubborn. The Bible calls those attitudes "sin". No wonder the world is in the state it is.

But here's the thing. God loves the world he made. And he loves us too, despite everything. So God devised a plan, a plan to give the greatest gift ever. We hear some clues from really far back in time. Here is an example, from the prophet Isaiah, who spoke about someone who was going to come and sort things out.

Reader 1: Isaiah 9:2 and 6-7

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. For unto us a child is born, to*

*us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.*

Our next carol reflects my comments about the state of the world and also echoes the words of the prophet in its final verse. We sing  
StF205 It came upon the midnight clear

So what was God's plan to save the world and sort out the mess we, humanity, were making of everything? We got a clue from Isaiah. It seems that God was going to send a wonderful person, a king, a ruler, someone who would establish justice and peace forever. Great! No doubt this person was going to a king, a rich person, a person full of power and control, sweeping in with a big show of power and pomp. No? Then who? And how would he come?

Let's hear how God's special person, his indescribable gift, came to the world.

Reader 2: Matthew 1:18-25

Reader 3: Luke 2:1 and 3-19

StF217 Silent night

It's really dark out there, isn't it? And I don't just mean the darkness of a winter evening, I mean the darkness of our time – the covid pandemic is still raging across the world, rules and regulations are still putting serious restrictions on our lives, the fear of a new variant is close at hand. And this is the second Christmas we've had to face of this.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the world, as now, was full of darkness. The country where Jesus lived was under military rule. Everyone was forced to go to their home town to register so that the occupying force could know everything about them. Everyone was affected, even a heavily pregnant unmarried mother and her fiancé. They had no choice – the regulations had to be adhered to. And when they finally arrived in their home town, what did they find? Chaos – all the usual hospitality options in uproar, all the usual care facilities overwhelmed.

Does some of this sound familiar? Of course it does. The particulars of the circumstances may change but the general situation does not. There is often a lot of darkness in the world one way or another.

But God knew what to do. He knew that he needed to bring light into the darkness. And the way to do that was to come into the darkness of the world himself. Which he did, in the form of a tiny helpless baby. That is his indescribable gift to the world.

That's God's plan?! What happened to the all powerful ruler who would sort all the bad guys out and give us what we want? Surely God has a better plan than a baby born to an ordinary family in the middle of nowhere?! No, it seems not.

But then, what better plan is there than to have God himself reach out by coming to live as one of us, as flesh and blood, to live as an ordinary human being and experience all the highs and lows of life, to face them all, even death, and come out the other side into light and eternal life.

Through Jesus, God offers to do the same for each and every one of us. To come alongside us in our pain and fear, to experience it with us and to take us through and out the other side. Through Jesus, God offers to mend every damaged soul and bring light into lives darkened by fear and suffering.

In St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he talks about this indescribable gift. And he uses a particular word to refer to it. He uses the word "grace". Grace is the word used by Christians to refer to the offer of God's love to each and every person in Jesus Christ. No you don't deserve it, no you don't earn it, no you can't claim it by right, but it's yours if you want it. That is grace, God's love offered to the world and to you personally, to cleanse you of all the mess you have made in your life and give you a new start and a new life in company with Jesus.

Your life is precious to God. He loves you, and he offers you his indescribable gift of grace in Jesus Christ. Take it. It's yours – for Christmas and always.  
Amen

Response prayer – prayers for ourselves and others:  
StF706 Longing for light (Bev verses, congregation to sing choruses, modified words on overhead.)

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.  
Longing for truth, we turn to you.  
Make us your own, your holy people,

Light for the world to see.

*Christ, be our light!  
Shine in our hearts.  
Shine through the darkness.  
Christ, be our light!  
May we receive your gift of grace.*

Longing for love, our world is troubled.  
Longing for hope, many despair.  
Your gift alone has power to save us.  
Make us your loving hands.

Longing for health, many are fearful,  
Longing for answers, many despair.  
Immanuel, you are with us,  
You are God's gift to us.

Many the lonely, many the struggling,  
Many the hearts that yearn company.  
Let us be neighbours to one another,  
Offering your love to all.

StF213 O little town of Bethlehem

Bev: John 1:1-5 and 10-14

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*

*Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.*

*God's gift was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God; children born not of natural descent, not of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

As we conclude our carol service today, may I wish you a healthy, happy and peaceful Christmas filled with the knowledge that God's indescribable gift of grace in Jesus Christ is at work in your life.

We are about to sing our last carol, but I need to explain what we are going to do. Everyone should have a candle. During the playing of the carol I will light my candle and then come to light some of the ones at the front. Please use your candle to light someone else's but be safe both in terms of the flame and in terms of how close to get to other people. As the church fills with tiny pinpricks of light, be reminded and comforted that, however it looks out there sometimes, God is at work in the world. His gift of grace in Jesus is driving out the darkness.

StF202 Hark the herald angels sing

May the Lord bless you and keep you this Christmastime.

May the Lord shine the light of his countenance upon you and be gracious to you.

May the light of the Lord be a lamp to your feet, this Christmas and always.

Amen.

Afterwards as people leave – on the organ, joyful and hopeful arrangements of traditional carols, e.g. Hark the herald, See amid the winter's snow, Angels from the realms