

An Advent Reflection
Stars, Light & Emmanuel
Christmas 2024



Stars

Genesis 15:5

He took him outside & said “Look up at the sky & count the stars, if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him “so shall your offspring be.”

Job 38:4, 6–7

‘Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?’

Psalms 8:3–4

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?

Psalm 147:4

He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.

Psalm 148:3

Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars.

Matthew 2:1–2, 7–10

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ... Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

Revelation 22:16–17

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”

Stars Reflection:

Stars have a beautiful place in the Bible. The book of Job speaks of the singing of the stars on the day of creation, and the book of Psalms offers a picture of intimate relationship between the stars and their creator, who ordains the movements of their dance and knows them all by name. In the book of Genesis comes that magical moment when God takes Abram outside into the desert and bids him look up at the stars. What he saw was not quite the same as we see in our light-polluted cities. If you can get away from the streetlights, car headlights, and house security

lights, the night sky is ablaze with myriad stars beyond counting. “So shall your offspring be,” God said. As the years went by, the time came for Jesus to be born – one of those stars of Abram’s descent. In the Bible he is sometimes called the Morning Star (i.e. the sun), and John the Baptist’s father Zechariah prophesies, regarding the birth of Jesus, of “the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” (Luke 1:78–79).

Stars Questions:

- Can you remember times when you have been out in the country, where you could see the stars with less light pollution? What was it like?
- Can you think of a friend who has been to you like a star in a dark night?
- They call celebrities “stars”. Who are the “stars” of your life, the ones you look up to, and why?
- What does the name for Jesus ‘The Morning Star’ mean to you?

Stars Prayer:

We thank you, O God, for frosty nights and starry heavens. Thank you for the beauty and majesty of the wide sky above us, lifting our hearts, moving our souls, speaking to us of wonder and glory. Thank you for the clear shining of the Evening Star as night comes down, and the Morning Star, the sun that rises in such splendour, reminding us of Jesus. The stars are too many for us to count, dear Lord, but you know every one of them by name. How great is our God, how great is our God! In all times of our darkness, whenever our life passes through a night-time, remind us, God of our journeys, to look up at the stars. For we ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen

Light

Isaiah 9:2

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

Luke 2:29–32

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

John 3:19–21

This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Matthew 6:22–23

“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”

Matthew 5:14–16

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Light Reflection:

When Christianity was embraced by the Taoist Chinese in the seventh century, they called it “the light religion”. Jesus is identified as the light of the world. Even in our two short passages from Isaiah and Luke, three different facets of what that can mean are included. Isaiah foretells the coming of Jesus as a light to people condemned to live in a dark place. This is light as salvation, comfort, rescue, and hope. In the Song of Simeon in Luke 2, the light of Jesus is seen both as revelation – opening the eyes of the Gentiles to new truth – and as glory, the radiance of God in the midst of his people. Our text from John 3 identifies the necessity of light for discernment, for the exposure of truth and reality. Our text from Matthew 6 considers how what we focus on illuminates our thinking and experience – if we focus on goodness, our whole selves and lives are enlightened. If we focus on evil, in place of illumination we have only shadows and confusion. The passage from Matthew 5 looks at light as radiance – goodness which both lights up the world and shines a spotlight on the beauty of God.

Light Questions:

- Can you think of examples of light you have found especially beautiful?
- Can you think of lives or actions you have known whose faith and goodness made them seem to shine?
- At Christmas time, the pure white light of God comes to earth in the multicoloured lights of humanity. What colour light would you be?
- What does Jesus – ‘Light of the World’ mean to you?

Light Prayer:

Jesus, light of the world, shine into our hearts and expose what is really there. Where there is sadness and gloom, may your light shine joyfully. Where there are shadows of pretence and hypocrisy, may the radiance of your truth chase them away. May your light so illumine our hearts and minds that our lives may shine forth like lanterns of hope, and beacons of the gospel of truth. This we ask in your holy name. Amen.

Emmanuel

Matthew 1:18–25,

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Philippians 2:5–8

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Luke 15:4

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?”

Emmanuel Reflection:

“Emmanuel” means “God with us”. In Jesus, God comes to find us. Our walk with him offers us as many challenges as we can take and asks of us probably more than we are willing to give: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus”, says our passage from Philippians – there’s a steep hill to climb! But the challenges of discipleship are not a means by which we earn our salvation – that is already freely given. The coming to us of God in Jesus is free grace and unconditional love, with no strings attached. He is “with us”. He is on our side. In the Christmas story we marvel again at how God in Jesus chose vulnerability; he put himself at our mercy just as we in turn depend on his mercy – he levelled the playing field in his Son. Humanity does not come out of the story of the life of Jesus very creditably. Right from his infancy there was always somebody trying to kill him – not because he did anything wrong but because power, violence, and corruption do not like healing, truth, and simplicity. The innate authority that was in Jesus posed a threat to what Paul calls “the powers of this dark world and ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). But then that was the very reason Jesus came; because we needed to be redeemed. He saw us with the eyes of a shepherd; because we were lost, he would come to find us, and never give up searching until he could lift us up onto his shoulders and bring us home.

Emmanuel Questions:

- “Emmanuel” is one of the names of Jesus: “God with us”. In what ways do you feel that he is with us – and with you personally – today?
- In our personal relationships, how do we create a balance between loving unconditionally and encouraging responsible behaviour?
- What do you like best – and least! – about Christmas?
- What does Jesus’ name ‘Emmanuel’ (God with us) mean to you?

Emmanuel Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for sending Jesus. Thank you for his courage, his vulnerability, his tenderness, and his strength. Thank you for the full and free salvation he won for us. As the time draws near for us to remember again his birth at Bethlehem, we pray for all who are homeless, for refugees, and for those who are persecuted or afraid. And we pray for peace in the Middle East, peace for all humanity. May your kingdom come, and your will be done here on earth. We ask it for his love's sake; Amen.