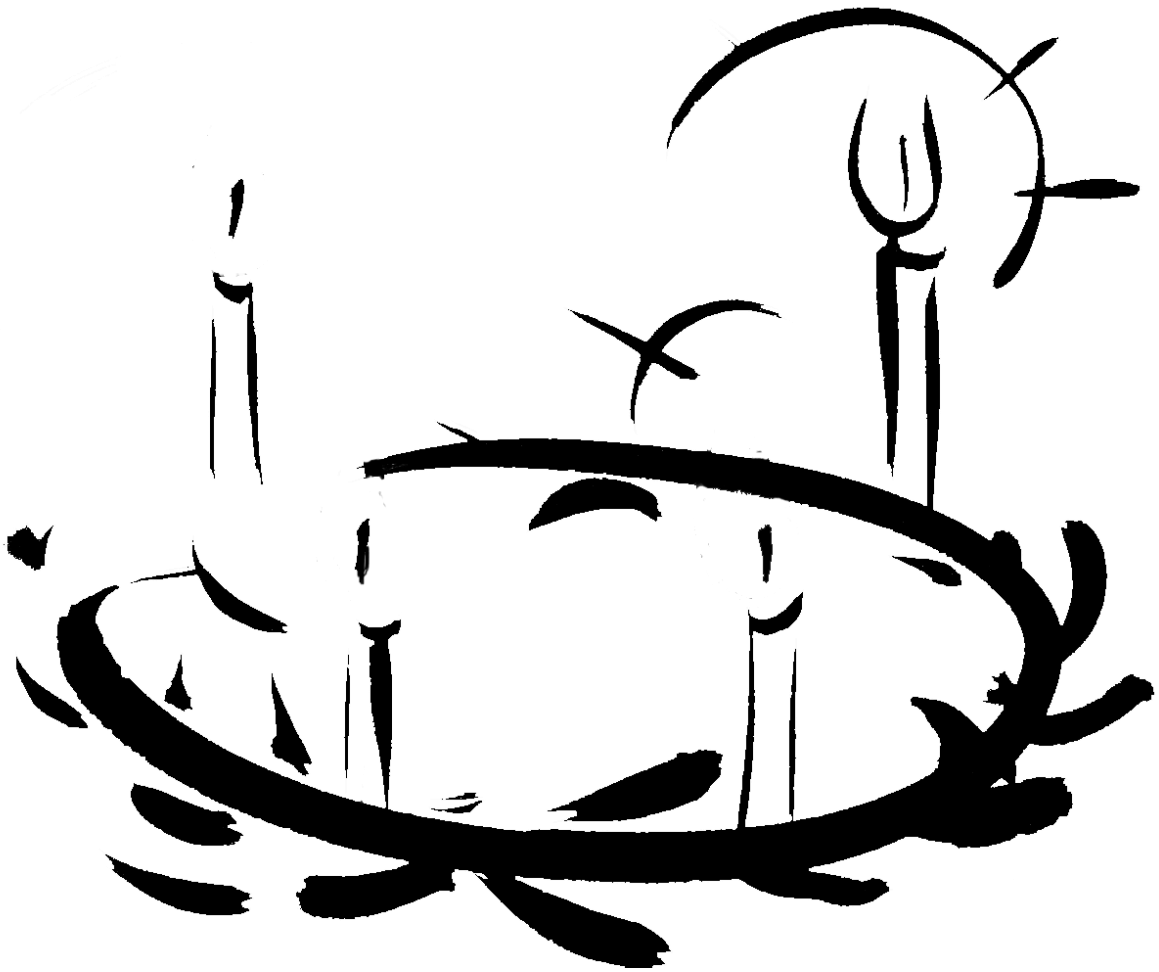
Advent Carol Service



Sunday 29 November 2026

6pm

St Stephen's Church
South Dulwich

Welcome to St Stephen's and to this service of prayer, music, scripture and poetry.

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation, as the Church prepares to celebrate the coming (adventus) of Christ in his incarnation, and also looks ahead to his final advent as judge at the end of time. The readings and liturgies not only direct us towards Christ's birth, they also remind us that Christ became human for the salvation of our hurting and imperfect world, bringing a light that will never be extinguished. We are called to rejoice again this Advent in the hope that this light brings, even as we recognise that we are flawed in our humanity, and dependent on God's faithfulness and grace.

While December is a month of extravagance and indulgence in the secular calendar, Advent – beginning today, 29 November – is, in the church, a time of watchful expectation, of waiting. We pray 'Maranatha' – 'Our Lord, come' (1 Corinthians 16.22). Church decorations are simple and sparse, and purple is the traditional liturgical colour. In the northern hemisphere, the Advent season falls at the darkest time of the year, and the natural symbols of darkness and light are powerfully at work throughout Advent and Christmas. The lighting of candles on an Advent wreath was imported into Britain from northern Europe in the nineteenth century, and is now a common practice. These small, flickering flames illuminate our path to Christmas Day, when we will break into joyful celebration of the wonderful mystery that God is indeed with us, and that God's love is steadfast and sure, now and for all time.

Until then, though, we wait expectantly.

Musicians:
The Choirs of St Stephen's
Oliver Lallemant, Director of Music
Caroline Lenton-Ward, Chorister Tutor

BIDDING PRAYER

My brothers and sisters, we celebrate at this time the solemn season of Advent in which the Church bids us prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ; a coming that we recall in the Child of Bethlehem; a coming that we experience in the gift of his Spirit, in the bread of the Eucharist, in the joy of human lives that are shared; a coming we wait for when God gathers up all things in Christ. Let us in this holy season reflect on the coming of Christ who brings light to the world. Let us leave behind the darkness of sin, walk in the light that shines on our path, and renew within ourselves the hope of glory to which he beckons us. And as we turn towards the light, let us have on our hearts all those who see no light, for whom all is darkness and despair. Let us pray that they too may be illumined by Christ who is our light.

The whole congregation prays silently, after which the minister draws the prayers together in the Collect of Advent Sunday

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness

and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;
that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Look, He is Coming with the Clouds. Everyone will see him, including those who pierced him. All peoples on Earth will mourn over him. [Rev 1.7]

Anthem sung by the Choristers:
O come, o come, Emmanuel – *Charles Gounod*

Hymn
Lo He Comes with Clouds Descending CP 31

READING

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-29 The psalmist sings of God's steadfast love and faithfulness. (KJV) - read by the Vicar

I will sing of the mercies of the Lord for ever: with my mouth will I make known thy faithfulness to all generations.
For I have said, Mercy shall be built up for ever: thy faithfulness shalt thou establish in the very heavens.
I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant,
Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations.
Then thou spakest in vision to thy holy one, and saidst, I have laid help upon one that is mighty; I have exalted one chosen out of the people.
I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him:
With whom my hand shall be established: mine arm also shall strengthen him.
The enemy shall not exact upon him; nor the son of wickedness afflict him.
And I will beat down his foes before his face, and plague them that hate him.
But my faithfulness and my mercy shall be with him: and in my name shall his horn be exalted.
I will set his hand also in the sea, and his right hand in the rivers.
He shall cry unto me, Thou art my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation.
Also I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth.
My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him.
His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven.

Anthem sung by the Choir:
Domine praestolamur – *William Byrd*

Poem

First Coming, by Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007) – *read by Rob Stott*

American poet Madeleine L'Engle reminds us that Christ became man to come alongside us in our suffering world precisely because of its imperfection. For this, we can rejoice!

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.

He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Anthem sung by the Choristers:

The Angel Gabriel – *traditional*

READING

Isaiah 42:1-9 – read by John Durham

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Poem

The Coming, by R.S. Thomas – *read by Nicholas Vineall*

Welsh poet-priest R.S. Thomas imagines a conversation between God the Father and God the Son, as the Son determines to come to our spoiled earth, where he will die on the crossed boughs of the tree on the hill for the salvation of all humanity.

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed

Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.



Hymn

O Come O Come Emmanuel CP 32

Anthem sung by the Choir:

I sing of a maiden – *Lennox Berkeley*

Poem

The Other Shepherd, by Kenneth Steven – *read by Senior Chorister Seren*

In this evocative and very human poem, contemporary Scottish poet Kenneth Steven tells the Christmas story from the perspective of the shepherd who had to stay behind to look after the sheep while the others hurried to see the Christ child in Bethlehem.

I stayed. Someone had to.
Three in the morning and the cold
like a rusty knife. The fire down to a dragon's eye;
a cave that glowed. The whole globe of the moon
broke into the skies' maroon hugeness;
lit them, sliding and glittering
down towards the sleep of the town
clasped in the crook of the hills.
Then nothing. The wind breathed, blew the moon away.
A whole two hours I watched, listening to the dark
huge about me, till the fire
gusted into a rubble of dust.
Then without warning they were back in a babble
with some story big as a fisherman's brag,
eyes wide with its size:
it poured loud and confused as coins
scatter from a bag.
I nodded and smiled;
curled round into the blanket of night
and closed my eyes –
they'd have forgotten all about it by morning.

Hymn:

Hills of the North Rejoice - CP 29

Anthem sung by the Choir:

A Spotless Rose – *Herbert Howells*

Poem

Christmas 1955, Sir John Betjeman (1906-1984) – *Read by Eileen O'Brien*

Betjeman, who was Poet Laureate from 1972 until his death, gently mocks the commercialisation of Christmas, and contrasts this with "the present that cannot be priced".

The bells of waiting Advent ring,
The Tortoise stove is lit again
And lamp-oil light across the night
Has caught the streaks of winter rain
In many a stained-glass window sheen
From Crimson Lake to Hooker's Green.

The holly in the windy hedge
And round the Manor House the yew
Will soon be stripped to deck the ledge,
The altar, font and arch and pew,
So that villagers can say
'The church looks nice' on Christmas Day.

Provincial public houses blaze
And Corporation tramcars clang,
On lighted tenements I gaze
Where paper decorations hang,
And bunting in the red Town Hall
Says 'Merry Christmas to you all.'

And London shops on Christmas Eve
Are strung with silver bells and flowers
As hurrying clerks the City leave
To pigeon-haunted classic towers,
And marbled clouds go scudding by
The many-steepled London sky.

And girls in slacks remember Dad,
And oafish louts remember Mum,
And sleepless children's hearts are glad,
And Christmas-morning bells say 'Come!'
Even to shining ones who dwell
Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.

And is it true? And is it true.
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings

Around those tissued fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in the frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this simple truth compare –
That God was Man in Palestine
And lives today in Bread and Wine.

Anthem sung by the Choristers:
What shall we call our king? – *Lynn Shaw Bailey and Becki Slagle Mayo*

Hymn
Come thou Long Expected Jesus – *tune Cross of Jesus CP 24*

CLOSING PRAYERS

Let us pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us
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.

The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness
and put on the armour of light. Come, O Lord, comfort the soul of your servant.
Even so, Lord, come.

O Lord Jesus Christ, come
at evening time, with light,

And in the morning, with your glory,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

He who receives our prayers says: Surely I come quickly.
I am the root and offspring of David, I am the bright and morning star.
Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.