Dear friend
I am pleased to enclose some poems and prayers for Christmas Day. Also, as the Feast of St Stephen (26th Dec) falls on a Sunday, it gives us the opportunity to celebrate this important figure of the early church, who is often neglected so soon after Christmas Day.

Starting with a couple of carols…

'The First Nowell', sung by St Michael's singers, courtesy of the Chet Valley churches:
https://youtu.be/hH7PshxnLiI

Malcolm Sargent's deliciously decadent harmonization of 'Silent Night', sung by singers from the First Plymouth church, Nebraska:
https://youtu.be/EJsDyFQ654c

A sprightly setting of 'Hodie Christus Natus est' by the renaissance composer Jan Sweelinck, sung by the choir of Trinity College Cambridge, directed by Richard Marlow:
https://youtu.be/B2rAkZE5UU0

Francis Poulenc's setting of the same words, sung by the Philadelphia singers, with a rolling score to follow:
https://youtu.be/3A3FrJVvWr8

Stuart Townend's folksy 'Immanuel (From the squalor of a borrowed stable)' with thought-provoking lyrics:
https://youtu.be/YksTeR61O1I

For St Stephen's Day it has, of course, to be 'Good King Wenceslas'. Here, a lively rendition by the Danish vocal Ensemble, with Michala Petri adding festive decorations on the recorder:
https://youtu.be/Ty2GogvrP4c

and, to celebrate Yuletide, Ian Assersohn's take on 'Deck the Hall', sung by the Amici Cantate:
https://youtu.be/fM9zq4W8wXU

Wishing you a blessed and peaceful Christmas and a joyful Yuletide!
Chris

VIRTUAL SERVICE 26.12.21
Stephen, Deacon, First Martyr.

Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble. (Psalm 119.165)

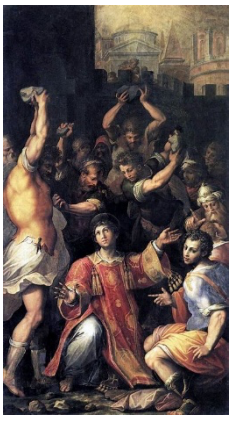
CONFESSION. Forgive us, Lord, when we are too comfortable in our religion, when we take you for granted, when we distort your teaching to fit our world view. Forgive us when we are obstinate and unyielding, when we do not allow your Holy Spirit to mould us. *Truly my need is great when it impels me to ask for help even of those by whom I deserve to be punished. But you are so full of such wealth from the unending fount of all goodness, that you delight rather to free by your goodness those whom by justice you are able to condemn. (St Anselm, adapted).*

COLLECT. Gracious Father, who gave the first martyr Stephen grace to pray for those who took up stones against him: grant that in all our sufferings for the truth we may learn to love even our enemies and to seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt, looking up to heaven to him who was crucified for us, Jesus Christ, our mediator and advocate, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

READINGS. 2 Chronicles 24.20-22, Psalm 119.161-168, Acts 7.51-end.

REFLECTION. Perhaps it is not surprising that the Sanhedrin reacted angrily at this point in Stephen's speech during his trial on trumped up charges. Their initial mutterings as he outlined Israel's history of disobedience turned to rage and grinding of teeth when he called them a "stiff-necked" people, spiritually uncircumcised. They valued ritual and the temple building more than preparing for the Messiah; they valued physical circumcision more than living as God's children. Like Zechariah and other prophets who challenged the religious authorities, Stephen was stoned to death. This marked the beginning of fierce persecution of Christ's followers, which continues to this day. A young zealot called Saul was an active participant. Following Stephen's death, many followers travelled away from Jerusalem, spreading the epidemic of good news which later, through Paul and others, became a pandemic of love, joy and hope.

PRAYERS. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mould me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. (*David Iverson)*.
We give thanks for your church here on earth, for the many who have risked their lives to share the good news with others.
We pray for the leaders of the world, that they may govern with justice and care for the disadvantaged, that they may work for peace and goodwill amongst nations.
We pray for all who are sick or distressed, that they may be comforted and healed.
Especially we pray for……..
O God of peace, you fill our hearts with hope at every Christmastide, for we remember again that this is the world that you have loved. May that hope, peace and joy fill our hearts. *(Wesley Ariarajah)*.
We say the **LORD'S PRAYER**
We share **THE GRACE**



FINAL PRAYER.
Merciful Lord, we thank you for the signs of your mercy revealed in birth and death; save us by the coming of your Son, and give us joy in honouring Stephen, first martyr of the new Israel; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *(Common Worship)*

POEMS and PRAYERS for CHRISTMAS DAY 25.12.21

I heard the bells on Christmas day
their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.
And though how, as the day had come,
the belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace of earth, good will to men.
Till ringing, singing on its way
the world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace of earth, good will to men.
And in despair I bowed my head
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
the wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



Lord Jesus, you have come to live among us. What do you think of us now? Are you sorry you came? Do not go away, but be patient with us, for you are one of us – the one who saves, flesh of our flesh, save our joy!

Pierre Talec.

He is so small the stars bow down
The fierce winds ease their breath,
And careful shepherds look upon
The one unsullied birth.
They kneel and stare while time seems gone
And goodness rules the earth.
The blight on man is all undone
And there will be no death,
For though this child will be nailed on
A cross, he'll be so since
He is the jewel of untold worth,
For him all stars have shone.
(Elizabeth Jennings).

READINGS Isaiah 52.7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1.1-12, John 1.1-14.

Jesus - Lord, for whom an inn could find no room, whom your own world would not receive, never let me close my door against you, nor against the least of my brethren in their least need. Stand not then at my door and knock, though that be a miracle of mercy, but lift the latch and enter, Jesus-Lord.

Eric Milner-White.

The Christ-child lay on Mary's lap,
His hair was like a light.
(O weary, weary is the world,
But here is all aright.)
The Christ-child lay on Mary's breast,
His hair was like a star.
(O stern and cunning are the kings,
But here the true hearts are.)
The Christ-child lay on Mary's heart,
His hair was like a fire.
(O weary, weary is the world,
But here the world's desire.)
The Christ-child stood at Mary's knee,
His hair was like a crown.
And all the flowers looked up at Him,
And all the stars looked down*. G.K. Chesterton*

Lord, born in a lowly stable, we pray for those who are homeless, refugees and dispossessed. We pray that your peace may prevail on earth. We pray for those for whom Christmas is a difficult time of year, the lonely, the bereaved. Comfort the sick, those in physical or mental pain. Especially we pray for …….



We say the **LORD'S PRAYER**
We share **THE GRACE**

God, who became as we are, may we become as you are. *William Blake (adapted)*