

Weaving Prayer and Attentiveness into the Season of Christmas

In her poem “The Summer Day,” Mary Oliver confesses:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed,
how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.

Oliver opens the door to an understanding of prayer that is beyond simply “saying our prayers” to living a prayerful life. Hopefully the pandemic has revealed more to us about how we can be prayerful and attentive to God beyond our communal gatherings for worship.

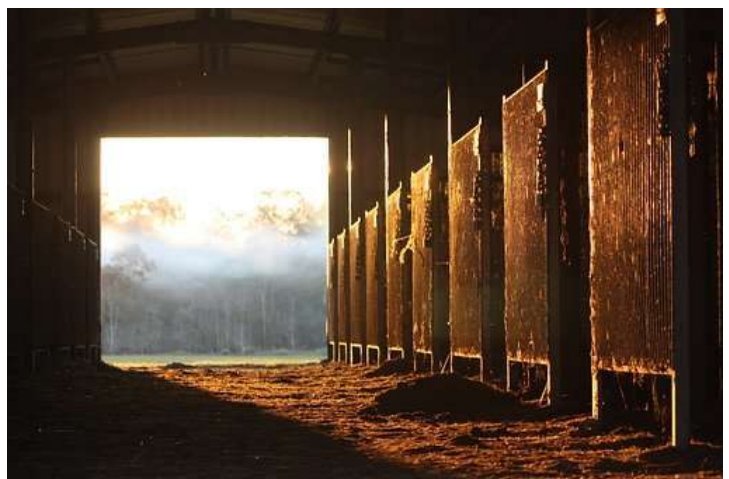
The prayers, poems and images provided here might help us weave prayerfulness into the Season of Christmas at home. May we find ways to kneel down in the grass, so to speak, discovering the Sacred in our midst everywhere.

Poems and a Prayer for Christmas Eve

How silently, how silently
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

—Philip Brooks

Legend holds that barn animals kneel at midnight on Christmas Eve in remembrance of Jesus' birth in a manger. Below are two takes on this legend—one by 19th century English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy, the other by poet Mary Oliver. Hardy encourages us to give ourselves to hope amidst the gloom of our times while Oliver invites a deep appreciation for the sacred within the ordinary.



“The Oxen” by Thomas Hardy

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
“Now they are all on their knees,”
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
“Come; see the oxen kneel

“In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,”
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

“Christmas Poem” by Mary Oliver

Says a country legend told every year:
Go to the barn on Christmas Eve and see
what the creatures do as that long night tips over.
down on their knees they will go, the fire
of an old memory whistling through their minds.
So I went. Wrapped to my eyes against the cold
I creaked back the barn door and peered in.
From town the church bells spilled their midnight
music,
and beasts listened—
yet they lay in their stalls like stone.

Oh, the heretics!
Not to remember Bethlehem,
or the star as bright as a sun,
or the child born on a bed of straw!
To know only of the dissolving Now!

Still they drowsed on—
citizens of the pure, the physical world,
they loomed in the dark: powerful
of body, peaceful of mind,
innocent of history.

Brothers! I whispered. It is Christmas!
And you are no heretics, but a miracle,
immaculate still as when you thundered forth
on the morning of creation!
As for Bethlehem, that blazing star

still sailed the dark, but only looked for me.
Caught in its light, listening again to its story,
I curled against some sleepy beast, who nuzzled
my hair as though I were a child, and warmed me
the best it could all night

When the world was dark
and the city was quiet,
you came.

You crept in beside us.

And no one knew.
Only the few
who dared to believe
that God might do something different.

Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord?

Will you come into the darkness
of today's world;
not the friendly darkness
as when sleep rescues us from tiredness,
but the fearful darkness,
in which people have stopped believing
that war will end
or that food will come
or that a government will change
or that the church cares?

Will you come into that darkness
and do something different
to save your people from death and despair?

Will you come into the quietness
of this suburb,
not the friendly quietness
of when lovers hold hands,
but the fearful silence when
the phone has not rung,
the letter has not come,
the friendly voice no longer speaks,
the doctor's face says it all?

Will you come into that darkness,
and do something different,
not to distract, but to embrace your people?

And will you come into the dark corners
and the quiet places of our lives?

We ask this not because we are guilt-ridden
or want to be,
but because the fulness our lives long for
depends on us being
as open and vulnerable to you
as you were to us,
when you came,
wearing no more than nappies,
and trusting human hands
to hold their maker.

Will you come into our lives,
if we open them to you
and do something different?

When the world was dark
and the city was quiet
you came.

You crept in beside us.

Do the same this Christmas, Lord.
Do the same this Christmas.
Amen

(from *Cloth for the Cradle*
by the Iona Community)

Prayer for Christmas Day

Let Your goodness Lord appear to us,
that we made in Your image,
conform ourselves to it.

In our own strength we cannot imitate
Your majesty, power, and wonder
nor is it fitting for us to try.

But Your mercy reaches from the heavens
through the clouds to the earth below.

You have come to us as a small child,
but You have brought us the greatest
of all gifts, the gift of eternal love.

Caress us with Your tiny hands,
embrace us with Your tiny arms
and pierce our hearts
with Your soft, sweet cries.

(by Bernard of Clairvaux 1090-1153)



Image by Gumbaynggirr/Dunghutti
artist Richard Campbell

Richard Campbell was taken away from his family as a child and placed in Kinchela Boys home where he would sketch to pass the time and ease the pain of being removed from his family. This image of Mary and Jesus was inspired by Richard's memories of being held by his mother.

"The faces do not have features so there is no doubt or judgement," says Richard. We can put ourselves in Mary's place and imagine holding Christ who knows and loves us completely.

Richard says the circle within the figure of Mary "connects the action of the Holy Spirit and Mary's response to giving birth." Notice the tender gesture of Jesus' hands—one placed over Mary's own hand and the other reaching out towards the heart of her response. What might it be for Christ to reach out to you? What responses would he find in your heart at this time?

Before a Family Meal

This is a moment
to find within us
the true spirit of Christmas.

This is a moment
to calm and quiet our souls
and find true joy.

This is a moment
to insist that, despite everything,
God is with us.

This is a moment
to dig deep and find love
is born again within us.

This is a moment
when the outer gifts
matter less than the inner one.

So, let us celebrate the feast of Christmas.

(by Ann Siddall for Stillpoint Centre)

Loving God,
We give thanks for your many gifts to us—
for the gift of this special day
in which we celebrate the Light of Christ that awakens us;
for our gathering around this table
which we have learned in these times not to take for granted;
and for the simple things
that capture our attention and bring us joy.
As we eat and enjoy one another's company,
help us remember those for whom this day is a hard one—
those without a home or enough to eat;
those who are in grief or struggling;
those who are alone or in danger.
Fill us to the brim with your love this day
that we might share love with others
and your Presence might be felt on earth again.
Amen

(by Christine Gilbert)

Blessing for Epiphany (6 January when we celebrate the Magi's visit)

If you could see
the journey whole,
you might never
undertake it,
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping,
step by
single step.

There is nothing
for it
but to go,
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:

To be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognise;

to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions,
beyond fatigue,
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.

There are vows
that only you
will know:
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,
make them again;
each promise becomes
part of the path,
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel

to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.



(Blessing and image by Jan Richardson)