

Christmas Eve Midnight Mass Talk, 24<sup>th</sup>/25<sup>th</sup> December 2014  
St. Andrew's, Totteridge -11:30 p.m.

### *'A Gift of Love & Hope'*

Grant, O God, that in the written word, & thru' the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, our Christmas Lord & Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before you came out tonight I imagine that, if you're fortunate enough to have an open fire, that you gave it a poke and put another log on, that you checked the central heating, adjusted the lights, locked the door, and then walked or drove to be here. Welcome! You are most welcome - I wish you a very merry and joyful Christmas, and a happy and peaceful New Year – whatever difficulties, personal, national and international, 2015 may bring. But I also want to ask you two questions. Why did you come tonight, and what did you leave behind?

First, who or what did you leave behind? The children, finally tucked up and now hopefully in a deep sleep, dreaming of the morning and the excitement to come. Perhaps you're thinking about the gifts you've shopped for and wrapped up so carefully: signs and symbols of your loves and joys and happinesses, of those near to you and dear to you. Or the older young, who half wanted to come, but just couldn't bear to admit it. Maybe they stayed behind to party but, you never know, they might occasionally think wistfully of what's going on here tonight. Or perhaps the grandparents are staying with you, dreaming too, but of Christmases past and the hope of a few more to come.

But perhaps you left behind other things as well. Disappointments in your plans, difficulties at work, fractured hopes and fractured dreams. Debts or redundancy or health worries; a recent bereavement; a broken relationship, a broken home, a broken heart. Have you left any of these things behind?

I ask you this because, as a parish priest going about my daily work I find that behind every front door there's always a story, a story of joy or of sorrow, of hope or of tragedy, a story too often of pain, or bitterness or despair.

So why have you come? Why have you come through the darkness on this particular night to St. Andrew's Totteridge? There's nothing very fashionable about organised religion any more. The Church of England, along with many of the ancient institutions of this nation, is often mocked and belittled in the media, pushed to one side as irrelevant, marginalised as a failure. Sometimes perhaps we deserve it. But a lazy kind of atheism is becoming positively fashionable, even cool. Yet those of us who worship here day by day and week by week, who help to keep this outpost of Christianity going, are not dismayed by this nor embittered, because we know that we follow in the steps of one who was himself pushed to the margins of society, marginalised as irrelevant, and crucified as a failure.

So we welcome you with open hearts and an open altar. All of you who wish to do so are welcome to come to receive God's gift of himself in bread and in wine. And if that is something for which you are not yet ready, come instead in a moment to receive a blessing, the assurance of God's love for you, of his mercy, his grace, his forgiveness.

But still the question needs to be asked. Why have you come? Could part of it be a longing to escape for a moment from all the pressures and the tensions and the strains of life at home; to lose yourself for a moment as you hear again the familiar Christmas story and sing again the old, old carols? Quite understandable. There's comfort in the familiar. But I'm afraid it won't work. You can't keep God out of the ordinary, mundane, everyday life. You can't shut him out of broken homes, or broken hearts. For this is what God is all about. These are his concerns and cares. It's precisely in your hopes and fears, your dreams and sorrows, your anxieties and joys, that Christ comes in, that Christ is born this night.

These are the glad tidings of which the angels sing. This is what Christmas is really all about: about God entering into our lives; about Christ as part of an ordinary human family; of his coming, the Son of God, as a little baby who made a woman cry.

Christmas is about God reaching out to us – not just here, for a moment, on this ancient, holy site, but at home, in the care home, at work, in the office, or in the shop or the hospital or the school, in every detail of your life, in the hidden places of your heart.

So, remembering that story you thought you left behind when you closed the door to come here, a story of love and joy or hurt or heartbreak, of desire & happiness, of guilt or regret, there is no escape here, there is no bolt-hole, but there is hope. There's hope for you and me. Tonight we celebrate God's seizing the initiative in coming into history, into your story and into my story, of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Christ stands at the door of your home and of your heart, and longs to be invited in. To be invited in, not as a temporary, fleeting guest, but to live forever with you and in you, your brother, your Saviour, your friend.

He will not bring with him any easy comfort. He won't bring cheap grace. Fears won't go away, sorrows won't disappear. But they can be shared. He can help you bless the joys or shoulder the burdens. Your guilts and regrets can be left here forever, and you can go out of this place forgiven and free. And you won't leave alone. In the power of his Spirit, you'll have someone with whom to share your fears and anxieties for the future. In your weakness you could discover God's strength; in your loneliness you can discover his presence.

And there'll be challenges, too, if you answer Christ's call and allow him into your life: a challenge to riskier but more glorious living; a challenge to even deeper love and even greater vulnerability; a challenge to new heights & depths of life as you really begin to live – perhaps for the first time.

All this is God's offering to you this Christmas, a gift of love and a gift of hope. Everything depends on whether or not you'll accept it. Just imagine for a moment how you'd feel if tomorrow you offer a gift to someone you love with all your heart and they reject it. Will you accept God's gift of himself to you, or will you reject him? Will you keep him with you throughout the year ahead? The choice is yours. He's here now: the child in the manger, the crucified Lord, the risen Saviour with arms outstretched. God's gift of himself – to you.

I'll leave you with two short verses from a 17<sup>th</sup> century carol:

*To us in Bethlem City  
Was born a little son;  
In him all gentle graces  
Were gathered into one.  
And all our loves and fortune  
Lie in his mighty hands;  
Our sorrows, joys and failures  
He sees and understands.*

And for that, thanks be to God.

*(I am indebted to the Revd Canon Eric Woods for the ideas contained in this sermon)*

## Luke 2.1-20

## The Birth of Jesus

# 2

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

### The Shepherds and the Angels

<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup>'Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

## Titus 2.11-14

<sup>11</sup>For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, <sup>12</sup>training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, <sup>13</sup>while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. <sup>14</sup>He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

and the peoples with his truth.

## **Psalm 96** Praise to God Who Comes in Judgement

<sup>1</sup> O sing to the Lord a new song;  
sing to the Lord, all the earth.  
<sup>2</sup> Sing to the Lord, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.  
<sup>3</sup> Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvellous works among all the peoples.  
<sup>4</sup> For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;  
he is to be revered above all gods.  
<sup>5</sup> For all the gods of the peoples are idols,  
but the Lord made the heavens.  
<sup>6</sup> Honour and majesty are before him;  
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

<sup>7</sup> Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,  
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.  
<sup>8</sup> Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;  
bring an offering, and come into his courts.  
<sup>9</sup> Worship the Lord in holy splendour;  
tremble before him, all the earth.

<sup>10</sup> Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!  
The world is firmly established; it shall never be  
moved.  
He will judge the peoples with equity.'

<sup>11</sup> Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
<sup>12</sup> let the field exult, and everything in it.  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy  
<sup>13</sup> before the Lord; for he is coming,  
for he is coming to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,

## **Isaiah 9.2-7**

<sup>2</sup> The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
<sup>3</sup> You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
<sup>4</sup> For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
<sup>5</sup> For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
<sup>6</sup> For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
<sup>7</sup> His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onwards and for evermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

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