

Midnight Mass, Christmas Eve
Isaiah 52: 7-10, Hebrews 1: 1-4 and John 1: 1-14
Mother Emma

“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

Every year Christmas is heralded at Carol Services and Christmas night services by the reading of the wonderful and mystical words we have just heard from the opening of St John’s Gospel.

When I was a small child, the words would fill me with a deep, quivering sense of excitement and anticipation – not because I had any idea what they were about, but because they meant that Christmas I had been longing for was finally beginning!

Perhaps many of us still experience something of that thrill, combined with the comfort brought by the reassuring hope and beauty of the phrase, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

John’s Prologue has none of the picturesque detail of the Nativity stories found in the Gospels of Matthew or Luke, or in our crib scene, or the many Nativity Services which have taken place over recent days across the country, but it distils the whole, powerful message of the Incarnation – the coming of Christ – into one brief passage.

We are told about “the Word”, the creative power which was with God and in God, through whom everything – not just the things we see and know, but the whole universe - came into existence.

And then, this Word, who had created our world and all life upon it, became a human being and came to share that life with us, “full of grace and truth”.

We are told that the majority of those whom he had created didn’t recognise him or accept him, and yet those who did recognise him for what he was, “to them he gave power to become children of God.”

These few verses describe the beauty and humility of one who had created the universe, and yet shared in the pain, the sadness and the messiness of human existence, bringing light into the darkness of the world.

Although the story of the Nativity and of Jesus’ earthly ministry was limited to a far-off time in Palestine, the assurance of light in the darkness and the promise that we can be children of God are just as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago.

The last few years do often seem to have brought times of darkness, the isolation, sickness and loss caused by the pandemic, the horrific wars being fought in Ukraine and elsewhere, political uncertainty and the economic hardship of the cost of living crisis.

Of course, Jesus was himself born into a country brutally occupied by a foreign power, in which unjust taxation reduced people to poverty and desperation, and in which those in government would do anything, even murder a whole generation of small babies, to hold on to their shaky power-base.

And yet, we are told, “the light of all people” came into the world to live with all these experiences, and ultimately to suffer and die at the hands of the human beings who did not recognise him for who he was.

Through his Death and Resurrection which open for us the gate of heaven, we are promised hope in the darkness, if we can only recognise and accept the astonishing truth at the heart of the Christmas story, so we too might be given power to become children of God.

Perhaps we might think it was all right for them – the shepherds, the Magi, the people whom Jesus miraculously cured during his ministry or the ones he visited after his Resurrection – they actually saw him face to face.

Perhaps we might think we would have made a rather better job of recognising the Word of God if we had personally encountered him on the street, or seen him lying in the manger.

We may well feel that we are at a big disadvantage in not being able to see Jesus as a human being.

But the Bible addresses this over and over again.

We are told that we see glimpses of Christ in the face of humanity; we see his compassion in the actions of those who risk everything to evacuate the elderly and children from warzones, or who take aid to places torn apart by natural disaster.

In a kind word, a loving gesture, time spent visiting the lonely, or shopping for a neighbour, in people who spend their lives working to bring in a world of peace and justice in which some no longer grow rich at the expense of others or seize what they want with threats and violence, here we can see the love of Christ at work on earth even today.

And we who recognise the light of life shining in such actions, can also join in God's work on earth, as those with the power to become children of God.

Jesus tells his disciples that when they feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, take care of the sick or visit those in prison, they do this for him.

St Teresa of Avila wrote, "Christ has no body now on earth but ours".

As St John says, if we receive and accept the Christ who was born among us at Christmas, and believe in his name, we shall be given power to become children of God, and as such to take our part in that light which shines in the darkness of our world, which will never be overcome.

Amen