

Midnight Mass, Christmas Eve

Isaiah 52: 7-10, Hebrews 1:1-4 and John 1: 1-14

Mother Emma

O little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Perhaps you, like me, grew up with a romantic picture of Bethlehem on Christmas night. I always imagined a peaceful little village, any noise from its inhabitants muffled by deep, sparkling snowdrifts, and the only sounds the contented gurgling of the Christ child, the breath of the animals and the quiet prayers of those who gathered around the crib in awe and worship as we do tonight. It is the Bethlehem of our traditional Christmas carols and Advent calendars, of Nativity plays and famous paintings.

Yet contrary to the words of well-known carols, it is reasonable to assume that in fact that night Bethlehem would have been filled with crowds of people, jostling and shouting, arguing over the few spare rooms available in a town unprepared for a vast influx of strangers who had been ordered to register for the census in their own home town.

But tonight, in 2023, the town of Bethlehem is silent.

The pilgrims who normally flood in to celebrate the birth of Christ at the site of his Nativity and take up residence in the city's 5,000 hotel rooms are conspicuously absent. Since horrifying acts of terror ignited the beginning of an appalling conflict in Gaza, in which thousands of innocent people have died, no one has travelled Mary and Joseph's route to Bethlehem.

The huge Christmas tree which normally dominates Manger Square outside the Basilica of the Nativity, has not been put up this year, and there is only darkness where the twinkling lights should be, and silence instead of crowds of pilgrims, worshippers and partygoers. Many here are living with grief, and in fear of continuing or expanding violence - people of all faiths, ages and nationalities, in the heart of the town known across the world as the birthplace of the Prince of Peace.

Yet tonight at midnight, in almost empty churches in Bethlehem, the first Eucharist of Christmas will be celebrated - as here - the infant Jesus will be laid in the manger and those present will once again marvel at the mystery of the Incarnation – God made man among us. They will be offering up heartfelt prayers for peace – as we do here – for their land, and for all places torn apart by violence and war.

People across the world watch not only the conflict in the Holy Land, but those in other nations, alongside the damage humankind is doing to God's creation, with an increasing sense of unease and anxiety. Yet we are drawn tonight to remember the sacred joy of Christ's birth at Bethlehem, two thousand years ago, and the hope that it brings.

Perhaps the line from "O Little Town of Bethlehem" which most used to puzzle me as a child, "*the hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight*", has never been more true.

Fears prompted by humanity's greed and selfishness, fears of escalating violence, cycles of terror and destruction, are mingled with the awe and mystery and peace found in the worship of the Christ child, whose birth drew shepherds from the hillsides and learned Magi from distant lands to kneel before his manger bed.

Why is it that despite everything which we see in the world around us, the contemplation of this birth can still offer us such an incredible sense of mystery and wonder and peace? The answer lies in the promise made to his mother, Mary, *"This child shall be the Son of the Most High, they shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us."*

God has come down among us, right into the heart of division and tension, of war and poverty, of fear and anger and violence. Fragile and vulnerable, God in Jesus is exposed to every risk of human life – he has experienced cold and hunger and threat, been the recipient not only of love and awe, but also of hatred and prejudice. He has faced frustration, poverty, been a refugee, his life affected and ultimately viciously ended as the result of political struggles which were not of his own making.

Yet at the end of his story, Jesus ascends into the Heavens to sit at the right hand of God most high, to carry deep into the heart of God the experiences and deepest emotions of human life, in which he shared from that first Christmas night onwards. We can bring our own anxieties, joys and sorrows to him, knowing that he shares in and understands each one.

Jesus came to make us into the best people we can possibly be – to call us, through his teaching and through his own self-sacrifice, to compassion and generosity, to wisdom and restraint and a clearer understanding of our own faults and weaknesses. He came to conquer fear and death and to draw us back into God's heart of love.

Even though human beings continue to create situations of conflict and division, again and again, we remember at Christmas as we kneel before the manger and seek once again to follow Jesus, that he is always *"God with us"*, and that he came to promise, as the angels sang, *"Peace on earth, goodwill to all."*

We pray tonight for peace on earth, asking that we may hear and respond to Christ's teaching and the message of the angels, and we give thanks for the Light brought by the birth of our Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace, in the stable in Bethlehem.