

It is truly wonderful to have you all here with us as we celebrate the wondrous night – which tells a story of hope, love and community which we experience at no other time of the year. Christmas is of course about Jesus – and the coming of God into the world in human form – God with us. But this coming – this birth brings light to so much more than the birth of one tiny child – it brings the birth of hope into all circumstances – it brings Good News.

As we come to this service tonight, some of us will come with our hearts full of joy and thanksgiving for what this past year has been, and the celebrations which lay before us. No doubt there will be those of us who come today bearing the grief and sadness of recent months or weeks, and a little fearful of the memories the next few days will bring. And I suspect that many of us come to this service with mixed feelings, on the one hand it is a joyous night, on the other hand the world and even some of our lives are filled with much pain and as a result of which it is hard for us to know how to celebrate.

But we are not the first community, or even the first generation to feel this – or even wonder at how we hold the tension of the joy of Christmas with the reality of our world. In fact, when we listen to the opening of our Gospel reading tonight we hear that this tension was in place at the very first Christmas all those years ago.

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. And so Joseph went from the town of Nazareth...*

Jesus is not born at home, but at a census destination, at a time when who ruled Syria marked the passage of time, and a point in history. We too pray this Christmas for many who will not be born at home, or even have a home; and our global history at this with time is marked in many ways by who is ruling or attempting to rule Syria and the similarity doesn't end there.

Earlier in the week there was an image that was streamed across Facebook of a family fleeing Aleppo – it was the image of a mother, holding her husband's hand who was holding their baby, and the mother was also holding the intravenous drip that was attached to their baby.

One of the reasons it received so much coverage was that apart from the drip – the image of these new parents fleeing in a desert terrain might have been an image that any of us might have received on a Christmas card this, or any year, of the Holy Family fleeing into Egypt from Herod who wanted to murder every boy child in

Bethlehem nearly 2000 years ago. When I saw this image it was marked with the headline – and who is Herod today?

It was a striking image in this most wondrous week when we celebrate the birth of the Christ child Jesus who within his first few weeks of life was also a refugee.

The birth we celebrate tonight is a birth which promised peace on earth and goodwill to all – and still 2000 years later there are refugees who flee and a world where most of us (though sadly not all) long for peace.

How then do we celebrate this Christmas? How then can we still believe?

The answer to these questions might seem trite or even insensitive – but it is not. Because what we celebrate tonight is not an everyday birth – but the birth of a promise – a promise about then, and now and the future.

The birth of Jesus – Emmanuel – is the promise that God is with us. And not just when we are successful. But God is with us always – when things are fantastic and exciting, when we are at our lowest and even when we are a refugee and fleeing our homeland – God is with us.

This is the promise of Christmas – that we never have to deal with struggle our humanity brings alone – because God is truly with us. This is good news which we need to share.

The world into which Jesus was born is much like our own – it was full of brokenness and fear. Jesus family lived in an occupied Roman territory, and I suspect at times they felt very little hope. But the angels announce the shepherds – ‘Do not fear, we bring tidings of good news’

Sometimes we are so used to hearing bad or disturbing news, that we can live in a constant state of caution or fear. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I don’t want to listen to the news because I know it will bring these feelings. And yet we also know that when we hear good news, when people share experiences of joy or perseverance of things that have happened – our feelings are different. Good news helps us feel encouraged and to stretch beyond our current circumstance.

This is the message of the angel in our story tonight – look I am bringing Good news – not more bad news- not a warning – but tidings of great joy. It is such a joyful message – such a sign of hope that the shepherds leave their sheep unguarded so that they might go into town and see this sign of hope. If you are wondering how surprising this is – this would be like the staff at Sainsbury’s down the road going home tonight and leaving the door open and trusting that no stock would go missing. The sheep are the shepherd’s livelihood –but they leave them briefly because they want to see this wonderful news – want to be part of this wonderful story – this story of good news.

And we have the same promise tonight – despite all the bad news we hear, despite the pain we might feel – God says to us – I bring you a story of joy and of hope – I bring you a chance to celebrate – I bring you an opportunity to be part of the story. And this is not just for one night or day, and then go back to sadness tomorrow, rather allow the good news to be infectious. The more stories of good news that spread, the more good news that will be created. And the more good news we share – then maybe the hearts of the world will be change. God believes that in sending Jesus the Good News into the world the hearts of humanity can be changed and peace will reign. The challenge of course is that we must believe this same thing.

We have to have the courage to share the stories of good news, and encourage others to do this, then maybe the hearts of the world will change – and we have a chance at peace.

In the end, peace starts with us and the way we live.

In a few moments, we will share together around this Altar a meal together; not unlike the Christmas dinner we will each share in tomorrow. We believe that in sharing communion, we share not only with those who are here, but those who are at other altars on this night, as well as those who have been here before and those who are to come. We share with the communion of saints who are also part of this the story of God's hope in the world.

So as we continue to celebrate tonight and in the coming days, let us take time to share stories with one another – stories that give us hope, stories of our resilience, stories of our lives – and we can be part of the story of hope and transformation this Christmas.

May you have a happy and blessed Christmas!

Amen.