

Well here we are – Christmas has arrived. It is not cancelled - but it does feel different. The preparation has been confused this year and it has been hard to know what if anything to plan for. Many of us may feel alone or disappointed, and at some level we all feel a little displaced. This year, the whole of 2020 has felt like a year of the uncertain and bizarre. We have had to adapt in so many ways to a constantly changing landscape – even in the past 48 hours.

And as I say those words, I realise that in fact that is the story of Christmas every year. Because on this night, we celebrate a story of hope, love and community which began for one family after a year when everything changed for them. A year when they had to respond to messages from Angels and decrees which sent them on long and unplanned for journeys. It has made me realise that Christmas, however we celebrate it, is exactly what we need, because 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 into an uncertain world.

As we come to this service tonight, some of us will come with our hearts full of joy and thanksgiving for surviving this year, and the new 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. Now our time seems to be marked by the exploits of the Pandemic, and many similar uncertainties. It raises the question ‘what has changed in 2000 years?’

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 – not just when things are fantastic and exciting, but also when we are at our lowest and even when we are a refugee and fleeing our homeland, when we are in the midst of a pandemic, or separated from our families – God is with us.

This is the promise of Christmas – that we never have to deal with struggle our humanity brings alone – because God came to earth in the birth of Jesus, that we might always know God’s comfort and joy.

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.

Tonight we share together as one community, in many different locations. And we believe that when we share together in prayer, or in the Eucharist when we can, we share not only with those who are here, but those who are at other altars on this

night, those who are on others screens even, as well as those who have been here before and those who are to come. We are together in God, even when we are in different locations.

That is the promised of Christmas, and that is the good news we can celebrate. Emmanuel – God with us – in the midst of everything – together and apart – in the stories we have the courage to tell each other, and in the knowledge that we are embraced by God, on this very holy night.

Amen.