

**Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist**

**Christmas Midnight**

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

**25 December 2024**

At Christmas, God in the precious gift of Jesus interrupts our ordinary everyday lives. God gives us the gift of love in the word made flesh.

This evening it's like a messenger, exhausted, who has run 500 miles, bursting into the Cathedral, disturbing our peace and saying at the top of their voice, 'Your God reigns'.

That is what happened centuries before the birth of Jesus. The remnant population in Jerusalem was woken up one morning with the same cry. God was moving in Babylon: he was about to release the Israelite nation after many decades of exile. Even the ruined walls were to join in the song of praise to God.

And we know how the story unfolded. God's people did return. There was a rebuilding of Jerusalem and yet the promise was never fulfilled. Israel found itself repeatedly failing to live up to what God required of the nation. Jerusalem's walls crumbled, the foundations of the city were ruined, and the world again fell into darkness. Yet those who were faithful amongst God's remaining people continued to look out for that messenger coming to them over the hills.

Today that messenger arrives. God once again interrupts our lives like a light switched on in the darkness!

Let's think through the Christmas story and how many lives were interrupted by what happened on that first Christmas Day:

Mary – a young girl, preparing for marriage, and then looking forward to having a family: *her* ordinary life was interrupted by the archangel Gabriel to tell her that she was going to have a miracle baby who was to be Saviour of the World!

Joseph – looking forward to marrying Mary and to family life, setting up his own business in Nazareth. *His* world was interrupted, and he had some difficult choices to make. Suddenly he was treading the long path to the census in Bethlehem with Mary heavily pregnant.

The wise men – God interrupted their patient astronomy and philosophy to tell them to follow a star that would lead them to the one whom they had worked out from the scriptures would be king.

The shepherds – God interrupted their work in the hills above Bethlehem with the angelic choir; excluded from temple worship because of their low status in society, did they find all their sheep waiting for them as they returned? We shall never know!

And then there was Herod, the cruel self-serving king: his world was interrupted when he learnt of the birth of a boy king who was God's chosen ruler; his heart was already ruled by fear and when God interrupts his self-centredness, he becomes even more fearful for his throne.

Who would have thought that the birth of one baby boy would have caused so much trouble? But this baby boy was God's quite astonishing answer to an unsatisfactory world in which the rich and powerful dominated and oppressed the lives of the poor, the blind, the lame and the hungry; an unfair world in which it was a struggle for ordinary people to survive, in which the worker was exploited and the threat of violence and warfare never far away.

On this Christmas night we have the opportunity to pause and reflect. This year past, our lives have been interrupted with storms, tempests, floods and fires. War has raged on three of our five continents. We have watched feeling helpless as tragedy has unfolded in Israel, Gaza and Lebanon; as the resistance of Ukraine to the Russian invasion has weakened, as the civil war in Sudan has seen atrocities that have barely made the headlines. We find it difficult to image what Christmas night might be like for Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem and in Gaza, amidst the trauma of bloodshed and the unacceptable death of innocent civilians. Nor can we imagine what Christmas is like in Kiev or Khartoum.

If ever the message of the angels – peace to those of good will, peace to the ones whom God favours, peace to those who are committed to making a difference in their activities of bringing people together in reconciliation whether that is in the midst of conflict or in our own work-place or community – if ever the message of the angels is needed it is now.

The one who is the Prince of Peace is the gift we receive in our hearts; Jesus who is God's peace is the gift of empowerment. God's peace can turn the human heart from selfishness to love and as that happens, we become those whom God favours helping God bring peace to this world, person by person, step by step.

But other troubles are on our minds. These past few weeks in the Church of England have been challenging following the Makin Review on safeguarding. Our hearts and prayers are with all those affected by sexual abuse within the church. This is a time of crisis. There is so much from which to repent; so much to learn as our awareness of what has happened increases; so much to discern about the future of the church at both national and local levels; so much to reflect on as we strive to become a safe church, serving the needs of our local communities because that is what we are for.

We are called in the light of deep failure to live the Good News of salvation. The name Jesus means 'God saves'. God revealed in Jesus is the God of safety and security. Only God can change the human heart, and that must start with us, with the church. Only if human hearts are changed by the power of God's love will we become a safer church. God reaches out to us his people tonight as our Judge who enables us to confront the past honestly, but also our Saviour who has the power to turn us around and discover the fullness of our life together that the Christmas story promises.

A beautiful story is recounted every Christmas time in the forests of Provence in southern France. It's about the four shepherds who came to Bethlehem to see the child. One brought

eggs, another brought bread and cheese, the third brought wine. And the fourth brought nothing at all. People called him L'Enchanté.

The first three shepherds chatted with Mary and Joseph, commenting on how well Mary looked, how cozy was the cave and how handsomely Joseph had appointed it, what a beautiful starlit night it was! They congratulated the proud parents, presented them with their gifts and assured them that if they needed anything else, they had only to ask.

Then, someone asked, "Where is L'Enchanté?" They searched high and low, up and down, inside and out. Finally, someone peeked through the blanket hung against the draft, into the crèche. There, kneeling at the crib, was L'Enchanté. – the Enchanted one. Like a flag or a flame taking the direction of the wind, he had taken the direction of love. Through the entire night, he stayed in adoration, whispering, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu – Jesus, Jesus, Jesus"

L'Enchanté is a name in French that simply means delighted. Here was the fourth shepherd simply delighting in the baby in the manger. In worldly terms behind the blanket was the last place anyone would have looked – toward a weak, vulnerable infant in the first few uncertain hours of life. God hidden in human form in the place from which the cattle ate. God 'veiled in flesh', behind the veil of humanity - that is where the glory of God shines. In the most unexpected of places, there is God. We simply delight in the one who is in front of us and who is revealed in his glory this day.

But what does our response look like in practice as God interrupts our lives tonight? What does it mean to delight in the infant before us?

First, we respond in *faith*: the light of the crib, the light shining in the darkness and in the dawning of Christmas Day draws us near to God. We encounter a mystery, something we cannot understand – God in human form, heaven come down to earth, God hidden in a tiny vulnerable child. God invites us to respond to the infant Jesus in faith and to ask him to take up residence in our lives. We are invited to take a leap of faith and invite the infant Jesus into our hearts where the promise is that he will turn our hearts and the hearts of all people towards the ways of God.

Then we are to respond in *hope*: like all human children Jesus grows; he grows into his kingdom and peace and justice flourish around him. The world does not change overnight. If we accept Jesus' invitation to follow him then hope will grow inside us as God works within us patiently day by day. Hope grows inside us like the infant Jesus grew in his mother's womb.

In 2025 there are going to be difficult moments – politically, economically, culturally, religiously - and each of us will have important personal challenges amidst many global and local changes. God wants us to find hope in the infant Jesus – hope that all those things which prevent us from flourishing as human beings do not have the last word – hope that in our trials and in our suffering, we are the recipients of God's grace.

And then in *love*. Jesus is the gift of God in love. God's love is so powerful that it defeats all that tries to quench it. When the same Jesus born in Bethlehem becomes the crucified one a few miles down the road outside Jerusalem thirty-three years later, God's love was so strong that it overcame even death. As we receive the gift of love, so we are empowered to love our neighbour and all those in our world who are weak and vulnerable this Christmas time.

Faith, hope and love. These are the foundations which God invites us to lay in our lives, foundations that will endure all that happens to us even in the most difficult of times.

God interrupts our lives at Christmas. As we gaze at the manger through the eyes of faith, let's respond with hope and love to what God has done for us in Jesus.

May I wish you all a very happy Christmas!

**The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson, Dean of Derby**