**23rd December 2012**

**John 1.1-18**

A girl of eight years old went with a group of family and friends to see the Christmas light displays at various places throughout the city. At one church they stopped and looked more closely at a beautiful nativity scene.

‘Isn’t it beautiful said the little girl’s grandmother.

Look at all the animals, and Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus’.

Yes, Grandma’ replied the girl. ‘It’s really nice. But one thing bothers me. Isn’t baby Jesus ever going to grow up? He’s the same size he was last year!’

Some things never change do they? Our world doesn’t seem to change. Every year we celebrate Christmas and the Christmas message: peace on earth, good will to all mankind – But it doesn’t seem to make any difference.

I was in the newsagent the other week standing in the queue waiting to pay my papers. I was wearing my clerical shirt – dog collar and all that . The woman behind me pointed to the newspaper headlines about the shooting of the children in the primary school in Newtown Connecticut – She said ‘so this is Christmas?’ - she didn’t break into a John Lennon song – ‘don’t know what Jesus thinks of this’ she said. ‘We should still celebrate his birth’ I said. ‘He did enjoy a party’. But yes – the world’s not right - is it?– we still need to share the peace and light.

Today's Nativity play is based on the prologue to the Gospel According to John. Gospel means ‘good news’. This is John's nativity story; it is not with shepherds and angels or a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. In this nativity story, this Christmas story, John takes us back to the beginning. He echoes the words from the book of Genesis: In the beginning God created; God moved over the chaos and darkness and said, "Let there be light." In John's gospel, this same God became flesh and blood and dwelt among us. John says, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

The God who takes on our flesh does not ignore the darkness but shines in the very midst of it. However John also says the world didn’t recognize the light of Christ. It didn’t accept it.

Our Moderator of the West Midlands Synod of the United Reformed Church, Roy Lowes – nearest we get to a bishop, - says in his Christmas letter:

*Our society is full of educated and public figures telling us that we do not need the stories of God and baby Jesus in order to find spiritual succour. John Young, producer of Spitting Image and QI on Desert Island Discs said that he found meaning in a book which helped him engage with his own identity. Terry Pratchett said in a radio interview recently that he was a confirmed atheist but has a little shrine downstairs to ‘my lady the Muse’. These types of spiritual searchings are both very close to and also very distant from what we Christians bear witness to.*

*Yes science and shrines and times of quiet and contemplating the wonder of the world on a hill top or in a beautiful cathedral are worthwhile spiritual journeyings. But they are in danger of being not so much anti religious as more spirituality ‘lite’. Christianity is about wonder yes. But it also takes seriously the deeper darkness of our human experiences and the deeper wonder. Christianity gets dirt beneath its fingernails and nails through the palms of it hands.*

*Society in the UK has witnessed this summer such up lifting things as the Olympics with its gloriously eccentric and highly creative opening ceremonies and wonderful sporting achievements and the glories of the Para Olympics where difficulty was overcome through struggle. But we have also seen and had to acknowledge that that does not represent the whole story of who we are. The report on Hillsborough tells us that victims of tragedy and their families can be turned on and victimised against by ordinary people in the police force and journalism and indeed by us all who bought the false stories. And the horrors of what is surfacing about Jimmy Savile do not just tell us about things we need to blame the BBC for or the NHS for - rather they show us how society was and maybe still is. How ordinary people acted, what they turned a blind eye to, - ‘we will get it in the neck if we say anything so we will keep quiet’.*

*This is a delicious but also a dark world which cannot have its human potential realised by living off the glow of the Olympics or breathing in fresh air on a hill top or having a muse in one’s home. It needs something which comes from the truth of what lies behind, beneath and beyond this inexplicably complex universe. That which incomprehensibly has become a human being to reveal our darkness and yet –even thereby - show us our value. This child of Christmas reveals our inclination to solve our problems by making victims of others (over and over and over again) and yet still offers us God given self esteem which has the potency to undermine the rhythms of victimisation.*

Babies symbolise hope – new birth. When you gaze on a baby you wonder about the mystery of life, the joy of life. You may also wonder what kind of world this child is born into. What kind of world do we want for this child. What values do we want to give this child. Do we want this child to live in darkness or light?

We live in a world which is a mixture of light and darkness, good news and bad news.

The cross became the image of Christianity – and casts a shadow over the Christmas story. The Christmas story also has its dark side – and the presence of Herod in this nativity play will symbolize that.

For some there is not much joy around. In this economically difficult time, many have lost jobs or are unsure of what the future holds. There are those living with illness or with grief at the death of a loved one-have sorrow intensified during this season of memories of Christmas pasts and high, perhaps unrealistic, expectations of what Christmas is supposed to be. There might be those who are just as happy to have the celebration done with and over.

I have read that residents of Newtown, Conn., have been taking down the so recently unveiled Christmas decorations. Christmas has become difficult to bear. No one wants to sing carols or perform nativity plays.

And yet I pray they do. When better to proclaim "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" than when the darkness feels so thick and suffocating?

Nadia Bolz-Weber, the pastor of a church that regularly sponsors a hymn sing in neighborhood pubs called "Beer & Hymns," wrote about the importance on shouting down evil with carols of hope. In the aftermath of the Denver theater shooting in July, at the first night of the Batman movie The dark night returns.. she wrote:

I thought for a moment of cancelling Beer & Hymns on Friday night. ... Thankfully that thought only lasted a moment. Then I posted on Facebook that that night we would still gather to sing praises to God, for, as the funeral mass says even as we go to the grave still we make our song alleluia.

We sang our prayer to God, and in our singing I heard a defiant tone. The sound of a people who simply will not believe that violence wins, a people who know that the sound of the risen Christ speaking each of our names drowns out all other voices.

It drowns out the sound of cries for vengeance, the sound of our own fears and anxieties and the deafening uncertainty - because all of it is no match for the shimmering sound of the resurrected Christ calling our name...

This is the God to whom we sing. A God who didn't say we would never be afraid but that we would never be alone. A God who didn’t say we would never be in darkness but who said His light would shine in the darkness and that the darkness would not overcome it.

Someone I know has been in hospital for a couple of months now, with a serious illness. Things have looked very bleak and dark. Yet he and his wife talked to me about the diamonds in the dark they have experienced. Their trauma has brought reconciliation with estranged children. It has given everyone a news sense of perspective. They have started to pray together and found new spiritual strength. Every kind word or gesture shines out even more in the darkness of their situation – like a diamond in the dark.

So let us sing joyfully this Christmas. Let us remind ourselves of the nativity story. Let us rejoice in the story of the God who comes in the vulnerability of a baby and whose love will not abandon us even in the face of death.

May you let the light shine in this Christmas, the light of love, the light of love that is from God.