

Christmas 2020

We have been bombarded with bad news in the latter part of December. COVID infection rates are rising rapidly and many parts of the country, including our own area, are now in a new Tier 4 level of virtual lockdown. Most Christmas celebrations and gatherings have been cancelled. The limited face to face Christmas services we had hoped to have could not take place and as I write services in January are also being cancelled. We do this with heavy hearts but confident in the knowledge that we are acting to protect the welfare of our neighbours and loved ones. How can we risk spreading this terrible infection when so many have given up so much to try and stem it already?

Below you will find the readings and the text of the sermon preached at the Zoom Christmas Eve service which I hope you will find helpful. Do not despair – we are a people of hope.

Rather than the Collect for the First Sunday of Christmas I offer you the post communion prayer for Christmas Day:

God our Father
Whose word has come among us in the Holy Child of Bethlehem
May the light of faith illumine our hearts and shine in our words and deeds
Through him who is Christ the Lord
Amen

Readings

Reading: John 1: 1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 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.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Reading: Luke 2: 1-20

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. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the

Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Reflection (as preached at Christmas Eve Zoom service 2020)

- Truly tonight, for the first time in almost 20 years of preaching on Christmas Eve – I don’t know where to start
- Usually, I have a fair idea of how those I see in front of me are feeling, and therefore know how to pitch what I am saying
- But this year, as we know to our cost, everything is different. I don’t know how many of you are tuning in, or how you are feeling, or what you are expecting, whether you are optimistic or pessimistic about the future
- So, I have been whining about what to say for several weeks and some of my friends have, as usual, tried to be helpful
 - One said to me – why the big drama – the story is always the same
 - One said have a large drink, or maybe drugs and it will be OK
 - Another said the Queen would have the same problem with her Christmas day speech and sent me a hilarious image of her opening words – I cannot repeat those because they contain bad language but perhaps you have seen that very amusing sketch! If not text me after the service!
- But I just cannot get past the fact this year has been so difficult for so many, and looks likely to be that way for some time yet
- Yes this year it is all very different
- Lets just have a quick recap of what we wanted for our service tonight but cannot have:
- No gathering together in our beautiful atmospheric church buildings which we love, and where we can feel the presence of centuries of prayer and praise
- No gathering together of extended families to sing the old familiar carols, hear the wonderful readings, and to pray for peace and goodwill in the world
- No feeling of tradition
- No gathering of the local community and wishing Merry Christmas to friends and strangers alike with a hug or a handshake
- More loneliness and despair for the future than perhaps our community has suffered in a very long time
- So if you were not depressed when (or if!!) you managed through the wonders of technology to join us – you probably are now
- So before we all get more fed up lets remind ourselves about what we do still have:
- Our beautiful atmospheric churches are still there – open for us to visit whenever we want to
- We still have each other – albeit at a bit of a distance
- We are, I hope, in a warm and cozy room, and have not had to dress up for this service unless we wanted to!
- The carols and the readings are still familiar, and we can still pray together for peace and goodwill

- We have the same poem as last year because the sentiment that people are at their best at this time of year is still true
- We have, if not embraced, then had a go with, the technology that means we can still gather together as a community
- And of course you all still get to see and listen to me on Christmas Eve, I am even wearing my same old Christmas stole – how is that for fulfilling traditions!
- Most importantly the real message of Christmas remains constant and is unchanged
- The message of eternal Light and love and hope have come into the world with the birth of our Saviour
- As long as those things continue we are OK
- The Archbishop of Canterbury has written a reflection about the well-known carol ‘God rest you merry gentlemen’ with its chorus of ‘tidings of comfort and joy’
- He talked of the way in which people had cared for each other this year, the many acts of goodness and self-sacrifice, the way in which communities flourished and embraced the biblical concept of love thy neighbour
- And he notes that this is exactly the sort of love that we celebrate at Christmas. Love that gets its hands dirty, love that is open and generous, love that, without a great fanfare, makes a difference
- Love that brings comfort and hope
- Even though we are living in troubled times, even if we are spending Christmas apart from our loved ones, even if we are suffering, sad or afraid:
- I pray that, we may all find that love this Christmas, - even if it is at a distance, through a phone call, or letter or through zoom and facetime, or through our prayers – love that brings comfort and hope
- And I pray that in the true spirit of Christmas we may all find it in ourselves to share that love, so that we – and all those we come across - may find comfort and joy this Christmas
- Amen