

**May I speak in the name of the living God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Before going any further, please may I take this opportunity to wish everyone a Happy and peaceful Christmas.

I hope that before coming out, you left a glass of sherry and a carrot in an appropriate place for certain visitors tonight?

We all have our own particular Christmas traditions – whether it is sitting in front of a blazing fire with a mince pie and glass of mulled wine, hanging chocolates on the Christmas tree, the hanging of a stocking at the end of the bed or along the mantelpiece on Christmas Eve.

Or perhaps we have a favourite Christmas story or poem that we like to read.

Clement Clark Moore's poem, is familiar to all:

***T'was the night before Christmas,
When all through the house,
Not a creature was stirring,
Not even a mouse...***

And so it continues to convey a sense of expectation and excitement.

All these traditions, all these stories and poems, all our favourite Christmas carols, in their own different ways attempt to convey the truth that this night above all nights is special and holy.

For it is on this night that we remember and give thanks for the birth of - a tiny baby – a birth 2000 years ago which has changed and shaped the course of human history for evermore.

David Self gives a brief and striking biography of the life of Jesus.

- He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman.
- He grew up in still another village, where he worked in a carpenters' shop until he was 30.
- Then for three years, he worked as an itinerant preacher.
- He never wrote a book,
- He never held an office.
- He never had a family or owned a house.
- He didn't go to college.
- He never travelled 200 miles from the place where he was born.
- He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness.
- He had no credentials but himself.
- He was only 33 when public opinion turned against him.
- His friends ran away.
- He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial.
- He was nailed to a cross between two thieves.

- While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth.
- When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the kindness of a friend.
- 20 centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race, the leader of mankind's progress.

All the armies that have ever marched,

All the navies that ever sailed,

All the parliaments that ever sat,

All the kings that ever ruled,

Put together, have not affected the life of mankind on earth as much as that one solitary life.

But how is this so? How is it that one tiny baby, through his life on earth has had such a profound influence. Why is it that today, more people follow Jesus Christ, than any other person on earth?

Fundamentally, it is because on this holy night 2000 years ago, God lit the light of love which can never be quenched. As St John puts it in our Gospel reading, ***“the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”***

As the tiny baby born that night grew, so too, his life and teaching became a light and shining example for all to follow.

No amount of persecution, no amount of political correctness, no amount of suffering can ever quench the flames of God’s love revealed in the life of his Son.

On the roof of the Church of Christ the Healer at Burrswood, where I was Chaplain for 6 years, there is a very beautiful cross.

We call it the “Breakthrough Cross,” because the sculptor wanted to convey a simple yet powerful message, that “the Light is more powerful than the darkness.”

The black shape of the cross is made up of broken pieces of aluminium bolted together – representing the brokenness and darkness that we often experience in life.

The cut out shape of Christ in the centre allows the light to shine through – symbolising that the light of God’s love and healing is more powerful than any darkness.

“the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

As we look around the world we are all very aware that there is much pain and suffering in many places at this time.

During the year, there have been a number of natural disasters – hurricanes and earthquakes, together with flooding and drought in various parts of the world.

The ongoing conflict in Syria, and the terrible plight of the people of Aleppo. Countless thousands of refugees displaced from their own homes, seeking safety in other countries.

We continue to witness acts of terrorism, such as that in Berlin just a few days ago.

Our thoughts and prayers are with all those who have suffered in so many ways during this past year.

We pray and we think of all of these people and places and situations, in belief and trust that ***“the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”***

In each of these places and situations, alongside the pain and the suffering, we have witnessed an outpouring of love.

So many have worked around the clock to rescue and comfort all those affected, and to bring them the emergency supplies they have needed.

So many in this country and other countries around the world have worked so hard to raise money to support the relief work in each of these places.

Individuals, churches, charities and governments have been moved to respond to the human need and do whatever they can to help.

This love, this care and concern, this desire to share in relieving suffering, has brought light and hope into the darkest of situations and proved that:

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

This past year has been another challenging year for many due to the ongoing financial crisis and the impact on jobs and livelihoods around the world – made all the more uncertain by BREXIT.

Alongside the situation in our own country and Europe, there are still so many millions of people in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and India, who are living at or below the bread-line. Millions upon millions of people are denied access to education, basic health care and so many of the resources that we take for granted.

Christian Aid, Oxfam and other charities and organisations continue with their programmes of support and campaigning for the needs of the world's poorest peoples; bringing practical help, training and resources which are transforming the lives of individuals and communities.

Proof again, that even in the darkness of poverty, ***“the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”***

The most important message that Christ gives to each one of us tonight, is that God loves us. He loves us so much that he wants to come and share our human life with us. He is not a God who stands off and watches from afar –he is a God who wants to share in every aspect of our lives – their ups and their downs, the good times and the more difficult times. He wants to walk alongside each one of us, every step of the way.

I know that there are many for whom the past year has been a difficult one. There are those who during the course of the year, have lost someone very close to them.

There are those, who have experienced difficulties within a marriage.

There are those who have suffered through illness, or are coming to terms with the diagnosis of a condition that will mean dramatic changes in life and circumstances.

There are those who have lost work or home.

In sending his Son Jesus to live amongst us, God is saying that he wants to be alongside us in each of these situations, to support and encourage and to help us find a way through.

We can experience this support and encouragement in very real and tangible ways. Through prayer, through our reading of the Bible and through the support and encouragement that we give to each other as we seek to follow the example of Jesus.

None of these things takes the situation away, but they can give us the light of hope, the courage and the faith that we need in order to move forward.

“the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

2000 years ago, God sent his Son into the world as our Messiah, our Saviour. In other words, he has come into the world as a light, to help us see the things that are wrong, and to shed light on the ways in which we can make things different.

To really understand this, we need to allow the baby Jesus to grow up, and to see and hear the things that he said and did during his adult ministry.

Throughout his life, Jesus challenged injustice.

He taught the need to share generously the things that we have with those who have less.

He said that true greatness comes **not** through, wealth, power and influence, but through a willingness to serve others.

He showed in word and action that love and forgiveness are the only ways to achieve peace and reconciliation.

As we gather here tonight, to celebrate the birth of Christ 2000 years ago, we have the opportunity to stop still for a moment, to reflect and pray, and just imagine how different the world would be if we really took seriously the teaching and example of Jesus.

How different the world would be, if we really took the message of Christmas to heart, and made it part of our lives.

The power of God's love, shown on the First Christmas, still has the power to break down even the biggest barriers we try to create and bring light into the darkest of situations.

Tonight, as we hear the Christmas story and sing the familiar carols, we are challenged to make the light of God's love and peace a reality in the life of our world today.

In a week's time we shall celebrate New Year. Most of us will no doubt be making New Year resolutions.

Most years, these can be very mundane, about trying to be more efficient, trying to keep up to date with correspondence, or trying to keep desks tidy.

Wouldn't it be good if this year, we were a bit more imaginative.

As we celebrate Christmas this year, perhaps we can each ask God to show us one thing that we can do in the New Year that will enable us to walk more effectively in his light.

This might be a real challenge – learning a new skill, or using an existing one, in a way that we wouldn't have dared to consider before.

It might be about openly and honestly trying to put right a relationship that has gone wrong – allowing the light of Christ’s love – his compassion and forgiveness to show the way to healing the pain and the hurt in that situation.

It might be about offering our time, our energy, our financial resources to help others who are suffering in this country or other parts of the world.

If we each do this as part of celebrating and giving thanks to God for the gift of his Son – we shall be in for an exciting New Year, and together we will prove that:

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Amen.