

Isaiah 9.2-7 (Set I)

Titus 3.4-7 (Set II)

John 1.1-14

God comes in the middle of the night- light shines in the darkness

The German word for Christmas 'Weihnachten' makes an inextricable connection between Christmas and 'night'. It originates from middle German 'zu wihen nachten – in the holy nights, suggesting that there was more than one holy night – as if the mystery of God's incarnation cannot be limited.

In the UK, we have midnight mass, perhaps the only time of year when lots of people – many of them not regular church goers – like to attend a church service in the middle of the night—in order to experience the magic and power of the good news of the birth of Jesus being proclaimed in the dark of the night on one of the longest nights of the year.

I guess we are here tonight because we love midnight mass, and I will never forget Geoffrey Howards sermon a couple of years ago (Geoffrey Howard is a retired priest who helps here at St James), where he tells the story of walking into a Midnight Mass as a young man – purely by chance – and being so deeply touched that it became a life changing experience.

God is born as a baby in the dark of night in a stable or outhouse, in poverty. God comes to share our human lives not just as a visitor – but he really shares it, with all its frailty, vulnerability and challenges.

In the middle of the night lies the beginning of a new day.

God comes in the night, in the darkness, to be the light of the world.

In the early church the celebration of Christmas as a main festival didn't develop until the 6th century – until then Easter was the one and foremost festival- but when Christmas began to be celebrated it quickly gained in popularity as it speaks to people on a deep emotional level touching the human longings for acceptance, peace, happiness and community.

At the same time as it connects with these longings Christmas raises expectations that these longings will be met – we hope and look forward to a happy, harmonious, peace-filled Christmas

with our families, friends, and for the whole world, leaving behind conflicts and struggles and difficulties.. The reality, of course is often, very different from this – and as we are more in touch with our longings we also notice the discrepancy between them and reality more.

On a family level, we maybe more aware of conflicts, difficult relationships or absences as we make plans who to spend the precious 'holy-days', Christmas and Boxing day, with. Varying expectations and needs between different family members or friends, spoken and unspoken are at work, and unless we have learned to be open and articulate these, all sorts of family dramas may be developing, or being kept under a tight lid', with everyone breathing a huge sigh of relief when the visiting part of Christmas is over. Usually, people don't feel that Christmas is a time to address the underlying issues and have the honest, but potentially painful conversations that could contribute to healthier and happier relationships altogether. Let's not stir-up anything in this season of peace and goodwill.

More serious and painful is, of course, the absence of a significant person because of death or severe illness or other circumstances beyond an individual's or family's control.

Therefore, for many families or people life before and at Christmas may feel less peaceful, happy and harmonious than the rest of the time.

And when we think about the world at large, this time of year we have always have a heightened awareness of tragedies, natural disasters and war, which are often only too prevalent this time of year. Our hearts go out to the families in Glasgow whose loved ones died on three days ago on the pavement in Glasgow as the result of a freak accident.

That why the God chose to be born among us in poverty in the dark of night – to people in darkness.

The biblical stories telling of the birth of Jesus they are set within the challenging and difficult realities, as far as relationships are concerned –after all Mary is a young woman, not yet married but pregnant- as far as the socio-economic and political world was concerned into which Christ-child is born.

In the bible, too, we find the people who have been longing for peace 'Shalom' – which includes wholeness and salvation

- and what they get is a baby, born into the uncertain world of 1st century Palestine.

God is born in human flesh in a stable in a little corner of the world under foreign occupation.

God comes into our dark and troubled world to share our lives.

God takes on human flesh...and speaks the ultimate word to us' love'. I love you. And that makes us, human beings, humanity, infinitely precious.

We look at the baby in the crib - God's word of love. – to each one of us. To each and everyone who wants to look , or happens to look.

That's why in this night, we are filled with joy and peace – no matter what else may be going on.

Of all the Christmas services, Midnight mass especially provides the space where we can pause in the frenzy of our Christmas preparations, forget the Turkey, forget the difficult relationship with your mother or brother – and come just as we are– with our light and our darkness; our burdens, our sorrows, our fears, our failings, our hopes and longings – we can come as we are and don't have to hide any of it from this Christ-child, God's Son, in human flesh like us. We can come as we are, with our riches and our poverty and receive God's word of love – I love you and you are precious ...receive God's word of love and let it be balm and healing for our deepest selves, and receive this peace and his joy.

And even better news: it's not just for tonight. God's word of love was born, once and for all, to bring hope, life and healing for every day of our lives, especially when we are caught in darkness and fear. God's word of love, the baby in the crib, has come among us, once and for all.

When all words and thoughts fail, we are left with the gift of a young child, the word of love, given in the middle of the night.

Tonight, as we celebrate again the birth of Jesus, the Christ – the Messiah. (*Christ. Gr the anointed*) – we celebrate the beginning of a new creation - a piece of God's glory breaking into the world. Enough not just for tonight, but enough for a whole year. Amen.