

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

All of us know the beautiful Christmas hymn "O Holy Night." this carol was written by Adolphe Charles Adam, a French composer. Ironically, it was frowned on by church authorities who criticised it for poor taste and "total absence of the spirit of religion."

In that first verse the writer invites us to close our eyes and imagine the world before the birth of Jesus.

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining.
Till He appeared and the Spirit felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Adam paints a picture of a world of darkness without light, and a world of despair without hope. But then come the next three words "till he appeared." when he appeared everything changed. That is exactly why Jesus came; to change the world.

As we gather here tonight, there is a lot of darkness in our world. But we too gather as a hopeful people. And our hope is rooted in a promise that God made many years ago. The prophet Isaiah tells us, about 700 years before Jesus was born:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Jesus Christ came into this world to bring us peace. That is why I find myself so drawn to the beginning of John's gospel every Christmas. In verse 5 we read, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The Christmas story isn't only about angels, shepherds, donkeys, camels, wise men, stars or any of the rest. The Christmas story is summed up in those magnificent words from St John, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

At this time of year our villages and homes are filled with light, guiding us through the dark valleys of our lives. It is no coincidence that Christmas is

celebrated in the depth of winter, just after the winter solstice, as we look forward in hope to the longer days of light and the new life ready to burst forth. Jesus will say later that he is “the Light of the world”. Today’s Gospel says that the Light shines in the darkness and that the darkness cannot overpower it. It is in this hope that we long to see the darkness of our world put to flight.

Jesus is like a spotlight shining in the darkness of our world, shedding light in the dark places of pain, of suffering, of hurt, of violence. Sometimes the light brings healing, sometimes comfort, sometimes revelation, sometimes challenge, but always peace. When the light of Jesus shines in our hearts, all fear is banished by the peace of the prince of peace.

Sometimes, this world gives us no cause for hope, yet Christ comes in the midst of chaos and destruction and we hear again the gospel message; a message of ‘joy, love and peace’. But for many of us, joy and peace seem a long way off. For some of us, this may have been a very difficult year, far from peaceful, full of hurt and pain; as we look around our world, we may be forgiven for thinking that peace will never come. But God’s light of love does shine in the darkness of these situations, sometimes in the miraculous but also in the ordinary.

Those people who work with aid agencies; risking their lives, giving their time and their gifts to help; that is the light of God’s love shining in the darkness. In our daily lives the light of God’s love also shines in the darkness. Those who give up their time to help in shelters for the homeless over the winter months help the light of God’s love shine in the darkness. When we put others’ comfort before our own, this is where the light of God’s love shines in the darkness. When we take time out of our busy schedules to visit the housebound or lonely, that is where the light of God’s love shines in the darkness. We can help the light of God’s love shine in the darkness in the very ordinariness of our daily lives.

The birth of Jesus is God’s astonishing answer to all the things that would try to destroy love and hope, peace and justice, human dignity and joy – that would try to convince us that God is far away and that we live in darkness. These scriptures tell us to have faith, hope and love, even if the world seems to give us little cause to have a positive view of life.

This Christmas Eve Gospel shows us the true king of peace, who enters our lives, even if we have come to church tonight with pain in our hearts. Christ brings peace tonight especially to those with broken hearts and the light of God’s love

shines in our darkness. God sends us peace in the birth of his Son – that peace which passes all our understanding.

This Christmas may we all see and know anew how great God's love is toward each one of us and may we see the light of that love breaking through the darkness of our own lives, the lives of others and in our broken world.

Let us pray: Father of all, you have declared your love to all peoples by the birth of the holy Child at Bethlehem: help us to welcome him with gladness and make room for him in our daily lives; so that we may live at peace with you and in goodwill with all; and may we bring the light of God's love into the dark places of our world; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.