

So many things seem to work against this special time when we should be rejoicing at the greatest Gift that we can imagine – the gift of LIFE in all its fullness. If it's not the tricky weather, it's the state of the world, the state of the economy, the state of just about anything that gets between us and the real joy of Christmas. Mary and Joseph on the way to Bethlehem – pregnant, cold nights, dusty days, no room in the inn, the stable. If you don't have to be out in it! Sets some reality on the event, doesn't it?

1. But despite the weather and despite all its hype, its busyness, its commercialism, Christmas is a time which breathes hope, and love and goodwill. And it is good this morning to allow hope, love and goodwill to wash over us as we celebrate the **“Word made flesh.”**

It begins with the Birth of a Child – not just any child but the Son of God – the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy: **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”** – and in that birth we are made children of God – **St John** – **“Yet to all who received him (Jesus), to those who believed on his name, he gave the right to become children of God ...”**

And that is what Christmas is all about, for above all else Christmas is for children – **big and small**. Nothing, perhaps, tells us more about God than the wonder of children. The joy on the faces of children at Christmas is a wonder to behold – singing “Away in a manger” – opening presents, the tinsel and the glitter, the great excitement and expectation of the whole event. No wonder Jesus said that it was only as little children that we could enter the kingdom. Christmas gives us all the opportunity to return to that childlike innocence and trust to receive our Saviour and our King.

Listen to the shout of Joy from the prophet Isaiah: **“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news ... Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem ... and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.”** What wonderful words of encouragement. No restraint there, just celebration.

But what do they mean to us today – are we encouraged.

2. It has been a pretty difficult year for the most part – quite apart from our own personal anxieties and sorrows; the wars, the violence, the hopelessness, poverty, refugees – the problems continue unabated in many parts of the world and we are certainly not immune from them here: People are without jobs, without homes, without hope ... violence is never very far away.

So much is a complete negation of life:

But this negation of life makes a mockery of our celebration tonight of the Incarnation – the Word made flesh – the Light that is the life of all (**John 1**) and we should not accept it.

3. We have an opportunity to refocus, to get ourselves back on track, as we hear again the story of Immanuel – God with us.

For this is one of the great core events of our Christian faith. It's about the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. It's about the Word who reveals himself to shepherds and fishermen as well as to wise men. It's about the divine coming to us on the human level – God with us. St Peter reminds us in his second letter **PTO**

that he and his fellow apostles *“had been eyewitnesses of Christ’s majesty – we saw him, we touched him, we ate with him, he was with us.”* This Jesus Christ is not a figment of our imagination – he is real and his gift to us is real. And that gift is life, and life in all its fullness.

4. The Christmas story with its images of stable and shepherds, the angels and the star, quiet animals in the hay around the Holy Family has a compelling beauty and simplicity. But that beauty and simplicity ought not to tempt us to think that life in all its fullness is just that. For the Word came among us to **confront** us, to make us think what life is all about and to encourage us to respond accordingly. If we box God up in the stable we fail to see him in action in the fullness of life, dealing with all that negates that life. Christmas is not an entity in itself – it is a beginning and it must lead on into life; the life that is ours today and the life that will be for the generations to come. If it stops in the stable it remains just a story. Jesus certainly did not remain there – his life amongst us – his ministry, his teachings, his healings, his wisdom and his love, all of which led him to the cross and resurrection, are all of a piece – not separate events standing by themselves.
5. We, too, have to take it beyond the bars and gate of the stable and into the world around us for Christmas is for every day. This is our responsibility and should be our joy, too. The stable reminds us that it is not the **BIG** things on which we should focus, but it is in the little things that we often find Jesus. And so let’s join hands today with open hearts and eyes and hands – see the Christ not just in the stable but in the faces and places around us and rejoice, as the angels and shepherds rejoiced at Bethlehem.

A very happy and blessed Christmas to you all.

AMEN.