

**Christmas Reflection** by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

As one Christmas song goes "it's the most wonderful time of the year". Yet this year things feel very different because of Covid restrictions, resulting in families being separated and festive plans in turmoil. But that does not mean that the message of Christmas is any less important or joyful. It is a message we need to hear louder than ever.

But where do we start? Maybe with the words from Isaiah, and St Paul in his letter to Titus. Verses which encapsulate much of the meaning of Christmas.

*"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;*

*on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."*

*"For God has revealed his grace for the salvation of the whole human race. ... the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."*

Christmas is very often a time for memories – and when we look back on this Christmas, I am sure it will live long in the memory, maybe for all the wrong reasons.

But go back to the first Christmas and I am sure, as the shepherds settled down in the fields for the night watching their sheep, they must have been looking for quiet, uneventful time. Yet their peace is shattered by the intrusion not of wild animal trying to take some of the sheep, but by an angel - an angel who brings a message *"Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people."* Words that announced the greatest moment in history; the moment the light of God had come into the world or, as St John puts it, *"The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us."* The announcement that God had begun to reveal his grace for the salvation of humanity.

As those shepherds set off excitedly for Bethlehem to see the new-born child or, as later they pondered the events of that night, I wonder, did they really understand the reality of what had happened? Did that night change them forever?

As we celebrate Christmas the question to ask is still the same: what does the reality of incarnation, the child in the manger at Bethlehem, mean for us today? What does it mean for our world: a world where there is still so much darkness and pain; where there is so much uncertainty; where folk feel isolated and alone.

On that first Christmas night, rather than turning his back on humanity - which had and still does walked away from him with such purpose, God reached out to us in the humble setting of a stable holding out his love and his grace in the most profound and the most undeserved way – through the birth of Christ - Emmanuel – God with us: not to judge, or to condemn, but to save and to guide us back to himself. To reveal to us who God is and how much he loves each one of us. As St John puts it *"For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life."*

At that first Christmas God was giving us the greatest present possible - his Son.

*“The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth”*. The wording from John’s Gospel has the same idea as the presence of God being among the people of Israel in the Tabernacle as they wandered in the wilderness in the book of Exodus. It is a message that amongst the loneliness and isolation of the year because of lockdown should be comforting and reassuring – God’s presence is among us!

Returning to the Christmas story and the shepherd’s interrupted night.

They have a unique place not only within the unfolding events, but also within the structure of Luke’s Gospel. Being a shepherd at the time was considered to one of the lowliest occupations and, in religious terms it left them ceremonially unclean. As with Jesus’ birth taking place very much on the margins, isolated from extended family, so too these Shepherds are on the edge of society. Read the whole of Luke and you find this time and again—his message comes first to the outcasts and those edge. Jesus goes to the poor, the sick, the marginalized, even when that leads him into conflict with the leaders of his own day.

It is a reminder to us as we celebrate this holy season not to forget those who in our world today who are on the edge, for so many different reasons, and to walk Christ’s step’s, reaching out to them.

The message of Christmas is a message for all, God coming to us in his son.

2020 has been a dark year in so many ways, and now we celebrate Christmas, with the light it brings into lives: Light that is seen not just in child in the manger but reflected in the love that we share with each other in so many ways. We may not be able to physically touch our loved ones this year, but we can share love with one another; we can bring the light and hope of Christmas.

Christmas can be summed up like this. It is -

The message of God with us – the incarnation.

The message of God who never fails us and longs for us to accept the grace and love he offers.

The message of hope and fullness of life that comes that comes through the salvation that Christ child would win.

As the angel said - *“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 Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”*