

Christmas Message for 20th. Dec. 2020.

Introduction:

It is a long time since I have been able to speak to you, and what a time it has been, and what changes since this time last year! COVID, and lockdowns, and shielding, and quarantines. Sadly, many people have died, perhaps some you knew, and many more have been seriously ill. For all of us, life has changed in ways we couldn't have imagined. Quite likely, for many of us, it has been difficult at times to find God in the midst of all of this, or to understand what a kind and loving God could possibly be doing. Yet we are still here, still praying, still asking God for the help we need. May we do all we can to keep ourselves and other people safe, and to help and support one another to be God's instruments in our daily lives.

Here is the Christmas story as St. Luke tells it: Reading: Luke 2 (NRSV):

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ... (v. 3) All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged, and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, '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 Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Amen.

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The Holly and the Ivy

The holly and the ivy,
now both are full well grown,
Of all the trees that are in the wood,
the holly bears the crown.

Chorus

*Oh, the rising of the sun
and the running of the deer,
The playing of the merry organ,
sweet singing in the choir.*

The holly bears a blossom
as white as lily flower,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
to be our sweet saviour

The holly bears a berry
as red as any blood,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
to do poor sinners good.

The holly bears a prickle
as sharp as any thorn,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
on Christmas Day in the morn.

Reflection:

The approach of the Christmas season always prompts us all to look back on the highs and the lows of recent months and to compare our situation with last year. This year has been a year like no other. We think with sadness of those who are no longer with us, and we remember the problems we have had to face, not least the restrictions brought by the Covid-19 Pandemic, but I hope we can reflect also on pleasant and positive things, and that we can look forward with some optimism to whatever the future may bring.

We learn with dismay of the mounting death toll from the Pandemic, on top of all the other troubles in the world around us, while in our own lives, perhaps we are disappointed and frustrated by disruption of our plans for meeting loved ones, and for celebrating Christmas. Maybe these things divert us from the blatant commercialism that is so evident in the media, where getting and giving, self-indulgence and greed distract us from the Christ Child in the manger.

Yet if we can remind ourselves of what started it all, the birth of that special child in the humblest of circumstances, we may find afresh the wonder of a birth that divided time into before and after, that changed the whole course of human history: a life that altered for ever our human perception of love, and brought new meaning to qualities such as compassion, and mercy, and forgiveness and humility. We celebrate the birth of a man who taught a whole way of life that is opposed to greed and selfishness and prejudice and hatred.

Christmas is a time of celebration, of memories and friendships and families. It is a time also for re-examining our Christian faith, for finding fresh inspiration, and renewing our commitment. It is a time for looking back, with a mixture of pleasure and regret, but a time also for looking forward – for looking forward to the New Year, and to Easter. At Christmas we remember that the Word became flesh and lived among us: that the maker of heaven and earth took on human form. We remember the infant in the manger, but we remember also the crucified and risen Christ who is our hope and our salvation, the Christ who came that we might have life in all its fullness, the Christ who calls us to build a world in which all of us can live more fully, love more extravagantly, and be all that we can be.

Still the night, Holy the night,

1. Still the night, Holy the night,
Sleeps the world, hid from sight,
Mary and Joseph in stable bare,
Watch o'er the child, beloved and fair,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

2. Still the night, Holy the night,
Shepherds first saw the light,
Heard resounding clear and strong,
Far and near, the Angels song,
Christ the Redeemer is here,
Christ the Redeemer is here.

3. Still the night, Holy the night,
Son of God, love's pure light,
Love is smiling from thy face,
Strikes for us now the hour of grace,
Saviour since thou art born,
Saviour since thou art born.

Second Reading (Martin):

My own favourite Christmas Reading comes from the opening of St John's gospel. John tells us that Jesus was with God through all eternity: he was of God's being. Jesus is the 'Logos', the 'Word', the eternal Wisdom of God, at one with the creative power of God which brought everything in the universe into being. John also presents Jesus as the light of God, lighting up the truth, and getting rid of the darkness of ignorance and wrongdoing. In Jesus, the eternal 'Word' of God became a human being, a real person, living among real people. Those who met and followed him throughout his life were convinced beyond any possible doubt that he was truly God, come to be a man, and to experience what it is like to be a human being. This passage summarises the good news of who Jesus is. It asks us to decide what we believe about him.

John 1: 1-4; from Prof. William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*

When the world had its beginning, the word was already there; and the word was with God, and the word was God. This word was in the beginning with God. He was the agent through whom all things were made; and there is not a single thing which exists in this world which came into being without him. In him was life and the life was the light of [all people]. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not put it out.

There emerged a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, in order to bear witness to the light, that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; his function was to bear witness to the light. He was the real light,

who, in his coming into the world, gives light to [all mankind]. He was in the world, and although the world came into being through him, the world did not recognise him. It was into his own home that he came, and his own people did not welcome him.

To all those who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God. These were born not of blood, nor of any human impulse, nor of any man's will, but their birth was of God.

So the Word of God became a person, and took up his abode in our being, full of grace and truth; and we looked with our own eyes upon his glory, glory like the glory which an only son receives from a father. Amen.

Let us pray:

Let us remember all those people
for whom Christmas will not be a happy time this year.
We commend to God's care all who are unwell,
or grieving, or in any kind of trouble,
especially any who are dear to us.

We close with a prayer by Robert Louis Stevenson:

Loving Father,
Help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate
and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift
and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing
which Christ brings,
and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.

May the Christmas morning
make us happy to be thy children,
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds
with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven,
for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Blessing:

This Christmas and always, may you stay safe in the way of Christ.
In all your concerns, may you know the hope of Christ,
and the assurance his presence journeying with you.
And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and with those whom you love, now and always. Amen.