Readings: Isaiah 52.7-10; Luke 2.1-20

A messenger bringing ‘good news of great joy for all the people’.

Not just news but ‘good news’, not just joy but ‘great joy’. The coming of Christ to us, as a tiny vulnerable baby, unable to speak a word to us, but who changes the world by his presence, whose arrival re-imagines our world and makes the impossible, possible, is a profound message. It is deep joy. From the moment of his arrival everything is changed. Today is a day for us to recognise that good news and great joy, and allow our lives to be transformed by it.

How do we know when we’ve heard that message and felt that joy? How do we know on this Christmas Day that Christ is born for us, that God is with us?

Three examples of where I’ve noticed this transforming presence of God with us in recent days. Perhaps that will resonate with some of your encounters and experiences as you’ve journeyed to the manger. To this place of wonder and light.

On Saturday I visited a family where money is very tight. There was absolutely no evidence of the festive season, no one Christmas card, no tree, no decorations, no displays or any of the tell-tale signs that you’ve probably got in your own home now. No sign that I’d seen on my way there – a big red sign in a front living room window – like a road sign that demanded “Santa (and in large capital letters) STOP here”. The absence of these usual trappings of Christmas was very noticeable and surprised me. I looked around expecting to find them but this home was silent about Christmas. There were no clues. But the heating was on. They had just enough money to put something on the gas key. That was good news.

And then I was shown the clothes that had been given for the youngest child, a five-month-old baby, from a grandmother, packed with such care with the help of a seven-year-old, getting ready the clothes she had worn as a baby to give to this child. Presents from strangers.

The father spoke about a typical day as he tries to find his feet in this country, getting up at 3am to go to work. He was a sign of love and care, struggling to make a new life for his family.

I was shown the end of term school reports of the two older children, who 2 years ago came here with no English, and Jaspe got a D – a D for Distinction and Bertine had a note on hers from a teacher about generosity and kindness to others in the class that merited special attention. It was then that I recognised the great joy, in the pride of their mum. A home that seemed to outward appearances to be silent about Christmas – alive with Good News and Great Joy. God with us.

At the Sunday International Group, run by Richard Carter and a wonderful team of St Martin’s volunteers each week, over 40 people came this last Sunday and we celebrated Christmas together. Each person received a Christmas card made by our children’s C-Club. One person there for the first time receiving a homemade card was overwhelmed that a child had created this for him. That card was his good news, it spoke to him of a sense of self worth, value and dignity. There were presents of trainers, or jeans, or a rucksack, of new socks and underwear. All the volunteers sang
'We wish you a merry Christmas’ to the guests who seemed for those moments to grow taller. Great joy.

The St Martin’s BBC R4 Christmas Appeal for those who are homeless here in London and vulnerable around the UK has gone over the £1m mark this week. Lines from a poem on the office noticeboard sent from someone called Cedric Harris who had been helped by The Connection at St Martin’s that receives half of this money:

For many damp weeks I resisted your charms.
But you blessed angels opened your arms.
Your persistence paid off – eventually,
You were still waiting there, just for me.

And one of the volunteers opening the post said she had come to help and give something back because her son had been supported by the Vicar’s Relief Fund a few years ago when he was at rock bottom and she wanted to make a difference and ‘be there’ for someone else too. Changed lives. Good news. Great joy. God with us.

I wonder what God with us means for you? For those you love? For the world that you know?

I wonder what the good news and great joy felt like on that first Christmas Day? For a young couple, for shepherds at work at night, for those who heard about this birth. Light and joy in the darkness of night. It was the ordinary made extraordinary. God with us in a new way. Choosing to bring his love to the humblest place, with outsiders the first to hear and see the good news, a young woman saying yes to God, open to possibility and promise and pain, and a fragile baby, the source of light and possibility and peace, where God reimagined our life for us.

Like the home I visited this week that place was silent about Christmas too. Silent because the Word of Christmas was being born, and joy was all around. Silence in the dead of night, silence in shepherds listening to angels, silence in Mary pondering and treasuring in her heart all she had heard. Silence in God’s peace and light coming into our world.

We have remembered this year the anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War and just now the Christmas Truce as soldiers came together in that first Christmas of the war to share stories and cigarettes, take photographs, play football, sing carols. A silence of peace in the midst of war.

What we celebrate today is not just a truce, a break in hostilities for a time, but the breaking in of an everlasting truce. God with us for ever. As we look around our world we wonder how that can be. There are places in our world that are in deep darkness. Minority communities, including the Christian communities in Iraq and Syria, have faced the unspeakable brutality of (self declared) IS militants and have been forced to flee the occupation of their home and lands.

In a recent report on a visit to Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, William Taylor, a priest in this Diocese, brought news about the ecumenical Christian team there, many of whom are displaced themselves, working with volunteers and the internally displaced people (they prefer not to be called refugees) to provide humanitarian aid, and proper shelter in these months of winter. 1

They are helping them to tell their stories, to empower people, creating good structures, working as part of the relief effort, together with NGO’s and charities to see what future they can help create and hope for, making what seems impossible now, possible: a return to their historic homelands,

1 http://www.london.anglican.org/articles/iraq-at-christmas-a-report/iraq-at-christmas/
protection, bringing to justice those who have committed crimes against humanity, the setting up of a truth and reconciliation commission to heal communities fractured by mistrust and violence.

In an experience of displacement, great trauma and loss, there are signs of hope and possibility. William said that it was the children in one of the centres that had touched him most, when they invited him and his colleague, also a priest, to dance with them as they prepared a Christmas song. ‘We are down to earth, come and dance with us’ they said, and they did.

What better sign of God with us, down on the earth, in the dust with these children deeply involved in all that they have faced. Offering an invitation simply to dance.

Or soldiers in war playing football together in no man’s land...

Or someone who is homeless here in London being sung to (and seeming to grow taller)...

Or shepherds rushing to share all that they have seen of the wonder of God...

Or you being the place where the love and possibility of the Christ child can be born...

Good News! Great Joy!

Happy Christmas!

Amen.