



Christmas Day
Saturday 25 December 2010

Good news of great joy for all the people

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Isaiah 52.7-10; Luke 2.1-20

The Christmas card from the Bishop of London this year had an image that at first sight looked like one of those wonderful pictures from the Hubble telescope of a star, way off in a distant galaxy in some state of explosion; a picture capturing an event that given the distance and the time it takes for light to travel, actually happened thousands of years ago.

On closer inspection this picture turns out to be of light not from some far distant supernova exploded star, but the lights of this city now, London seen from the International Space station. In it you can make out within the cobweb of luminous light, the contours of the city, the docklands with the river Thames estuary snaking eastwards, Heathrow to the west, and the dark patches in the midst of it, Hyde Park and Regents Park. Round the edge the M25 motorway is strung like a necklace and in the centre the brightness intensifies. St Martin-in-the-Fields is located somewhere in that luminous central hotspot. If you're here visiting London this Christmas you would recognise this map of light.

It represents life and light *now*, not a supernova in the constellation Cassiopeia 10,000 light years away.

The birth of Christ is the luminous centre of Christmas; light shining in darkness. We hear the story that seems to come to us like the light of a supernova, from far away. Mary and Joseph travelling, a census, a birth in an out of the way place, angels bringing good news, shepherds brought in from the pitch darkness of the fields to see and hear things that bring them light and new vision; wonder and joy and peace for all the world. We see, hear and feel the light of this story but we wonder where the source is. Is it close by or is it far away? Is it light coming at us from a stable 2000 plus years ago or a light of new life that burns intensely among us here and now on this Christmas morning; wonder and joy in this city, an invitation to those on the outside to come in *now*, the possibilities for peace in all places in the world?

The journey of Advent that many have shared in together has been like the watching and waiting of the sentinels from Isaiah up on Jerusalem's city walls, straining to see and hear, preparing to receive the good news of this light coming into the world. We have been on the look out for God who comes amongst us; through our Advent theme *Born to set thy people free* - lifting our eyes and turning our lives to the horizon in expectation. Our Advent hope has been that we come to see and believe that God really does come to us bringing freedom to the here and now of our lives, Christ is *born* in our city, our world and our circumstances; that the light of his love is real and warm and is shared freely with us here, today.

The messengers of Isaiah carry those beams of light from far away. The good news of God's peace is like a fire going through a stubble field, soon those watching and waiting on the walls of the city sing as they see and hear what is coming and the people around them break into song. What was once desolate and forlorn has become a place of joy and light. It really is an image of freedom breaking in, people being set free to rejoice and sing as good news of comfort and joy, peace and salvation, goes out to the ends of the earth. God's promises have been fulfilled.

Today we are illuminated by that light and freedom in the vulnerability and openness of a baby, born among us, revealing God to us – just where we are – perhaps to uncertain futures and jobs, to vulnerable and fragile communities, to hopes of stable families and circumstances perhaps not yet fulfilled but longed for. Our prayer board here in church is filled daily with prayers for lives and places and peoples all over the world where love and freedom and healing, reconciliation and peace are needed. The good news, that is the light of this day, is that he is with us in all those places and circumstances to bring light and love and healing.

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In the light of that wonderful fragile new birth and life we see and hear things around us like the shepherds, that make us want to glorify God. The light that is real and present for us. Our own map of light.

Out near Heathrow airport a few weeks ago at the Asylum and Immigration tribunal courts, a much loved member of this congregation from Afghanistan appealing against a decision on his application for asylum in this country spoke up about his faith. Five other members of the congregation and clergy were there to support him. Schoolboy questions that he had been asked by the Home Office about the number of ‘kings’ that visited the birth of Jesus ...were eclipsed by the light of his passionate faith. This community continued to pray for Sam as he waited for the decision of the court. Today, we heard the good news that his appeal has been successful.

Light around the country in the warmth and generosity and sheer goodness of those who have donated to the annual St Martin’s Christmas Appeal, that goes out on BBC R4, now in its 84th year, supporting those who are vulnerable across the UK and homeless here in this city. When the story was broadcast of how one homeless person gave another his shoes, bags of shoes turned up in the appeal offices.

At a wedding here two days ago the 90 year old grandmother of the groom, back in this church for the first time since the 1950’s, remembered with fondness spending two weeks volunteering on the Christmas appeal, herself opening envelopes of donations.

Light in the passion for justice and a voice for those who are affected by government cuts, with the poorest and most vulnerable most at risk. There have been many *peaceful* students, schoolchildren, teachers and lecturers marching through the streets nearby concerned for education and the future of young people.

Light in our world after a year when a number of natural disasters have swept people off their feet, in Haiti and Pakistan and Chile and other places that we know. We are soon coming to the first anniversary of the Haiti earthquake in January. We remember all those working to bring new life and hope through care and aid and the building of infrastructures that create opportunities for indigenous economies, light for communities to heal and move forward with hope.

And then....the wonder of the five year old boy who carried Jesus to the manger here in church yesterday at our Crib Service, simply beaming with light and joy, holding the most precious thing in the world in his arms. At the same service a mother of five from Congo, hoping for news of her children back home, drew strength and warmth from the joy of children and families close around her, light around *her* just now.

We each have those experiences and people and circumstances where we have seen and known and heard God’s love.

The good news we receive today, of Christ come among us, touches our deepest of yearnings for light in darkness, for fulfilment of our hopes, for a different kind of world. It is light that is real and alive.

Like the luminous centre of the lights of the city in that Christmas card, the heart of the good news is our relationship with God who comes to be born in us. To bring light to the centre of our lives as well as our cities. Like the shepherds he calls us inside, from the darkness we may know or be experiencing to light; from the cold to the warmth of a real relationship with him. His love comes to birth in that stable place of our lives.

There is a quote from Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities, that has stayed with me from our Advent Book of reflections that a small group here at St Martin's prepares every year. He says;

'We are called to let Jesus love and live inside us. 'The secret things of God are hidden'. The great secret is that in this world of pain and division, he comes and wants to reveal himself to us. He wants to say to us, 'I wish to rest in you.' This is a beautiful secret.'¹

Like Mary we treasure the experiences of light and goodness we see reflected in the lives of those around us. *And* we ponder this beautiful awareness of Christ come to be born in us.

Like the Shepherds who returned glorifying God for all that they had heard and seen we cannot help becoming ourselves those messengers of light sharing what *we* see and hear.

This city of London is never in darkness because it is always awake 24/7. It is never in darkness because Christ has come to 'rest in us'. To be the source of light at the centre of our lives, the centre of our city, the centre of our world.

And that is;

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¹ Jean Vanier, *Treasures of the Heart*