

SERMON – 25 DECEMBER 2021 – Isaiah 52.7-10, John 1.1-14

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My dad had several favourite sayings. One of them was “Smile, things could be worse. And I smiled, and behold they were worse.”

We were planning a family Christmas for next week, but took the decision to move it forward just in case meeting is not allowed by then. It was lovely to have the kids with us, and my daughter-in-law cooks an excellent Christmas lunch. Then they went home early this morning/yesterday – in fact Hannah left at 7 am so she could get to work in Leeds by 10, having returned the cat to her house. Today the house feels very empty and I’m struggling to feel joyful now they’ve gone.

There are lots of people whose plans have had to change, perhaps you are some of them – and it’s not easy, is it. So many lateral flow tests, so many staff shortages, so many transport problems, so much confusion, so much head in the sand and it will all go away. The Dean of Lichfield wrote in his Christmas message that

I think we were all hoping for a more **definite** Christmas this year. In 2020 we mumbled our way through a highly restricted Christmas hoping that things would never be quite as grim again. And now, behold! The virus mutates and sends out new waves of nervousness and self-imposed social restriction. I led a corporate moan in the Cathedral on the third Sunday of Advent, urging the congregation to voice our weariness with the plague. I have to say the community responded magnificently and we sounded a rich and resonant “Ugh!” There’s a certain sense of release and relief when we can all voice our fed-upness and irritation together: therapeutic even.

He's right, all together now – ugghh.

The other person who summed up my mood this Christmas was Sarah from Darley Abbey who posted a photo yesterday of St Matthew’s just about visible in the fog. 2021 is a Christmas of fog. Nothing seems to be straightforward, nothing seems to be clear. It feels like we’re living in a Dickens novel. I did “Bleak House” for A level

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls deified among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Chance people on

the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds.

But Charles Dickens could also write most wonderful Christmas stories – and there must be time this weekend to settle down with “A Christmas Carol”, ideally two versions – Dickens’ original book and the Muppets Christmas Carol, my favourite version! And there, from an author who knew the reality of Victorian life, comes a real, happy Christmas novel. A story where the world is improved by the joy of Christmas - a world where healing takes place.

I know that healing is a reality. As you know, because no doubt I have told this story before, I spent one Christmas in Great Ormond Street Hospital. It was just four days since Gareth had had his heart transplant. After Midnight Mass in the hospital chapel, Julie went back to the family accommodation with Harry and Hannah, and I went back to the transplant unit. I will never forget a long hospital corridor with automatic lights – as I walked along the lights came on ahead of me, leading the way to the pool of light, the air-tight cubicle where Gareth was sleeping, where a lovely young Irish nurse kept all-night vigil. And after 20 minutes or so I felt able to leave him in the hands of the professionals and go off to bed – they were defeating the darkness.

I also know that sometimes healing is not a reality – and I know that, even when the darkness descends, when the fog seems thickest, there is light and hope and the promise of eternity to come. We know love and care and compassion, from so many wonderful people, and from God Himself.

Sometimes that love and care and compassion comes at a huge price – if you are working in our under-funded and neglected health service this year, you will have been asked to give, give, and give again – and for some the demands that are being made has broken them, physically and mentally. For some care in a time of Covid has led to death – and I fear that no amount of platitudes from a Vicar is going to heal the pain and the anger. It is not good out there - I was listening to someone the other day whose father is in a not-very-good nursing home. A home which does not have the resources and the staff that are required to make a good, safe, fulfilling environment. No platitudes from me are going to help her feel better about him, especially when she is banned from seeing him because of Covid.

For many people in this world, pain and hunger and suffering are an everyday reality. Christmas might bring a little relief, or it might not. There might be a bit more work done feeding the homeless this week, but most of them know they’ll still be homeless next week. Men, women and children will still be caught in

refugee camps, or held in detention centres, or desperate to build a better life – and their position will not change because of Christmas. People will still lie, still twist the truth, still ensure they get more and more wealth while others go hungry – Christmas won't change that. Sin and evil are the everyday reality of life, and most of us often wonder whether the birth of a baby in Bethlehem has made any difference at all.

Let's be honest. The shepherds saw the light, heard the angels, found the Messiah – but did many other people in Bethlehem realise much was going on? Kings journeyed and found the Messiah – and the children of Bethlehem paid a terrible price as the darkness of evil rose up and did its best to defeat the light in the stable. So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised when we seek to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, and most of our community doesn't care.

The coming of the Christ child does not wave a magic wand and make everything better. Sin is still a reality, evil is still a reality, human beings are not very nice people. But I do believe that Christmas shows us God is with us, and God is greater than the power of sin, God has conquered evil through the victory of love, God helps us humans be better, God gives the power of love and forgiveness which keeps us working for a better world.

I was given a lecture the other day by someone who didn't like one of my facebook comments. "I was mixing religion and politics, I should stick to prayer and worship and stay out of the world." No, that's not what God did – that's not what we do. Christian Aid will benefit because of our worship, men and women will be supported by our care, our donations. Next weekend we will donate for the food bank – and men and women will be supported by our care, our donations. We will make sure people are fed – a basic human need that Society fails to meet, but Christian people, men and women of goodwill (not all of them Christian), are empowered by love, empowered by Christ – faith is involved in this world. We make it a better place.

The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Don't forget that our Christian faith links the light of the stable at Bethlehem with the darkness of the cross on Golgotha. Then it links Golgotha to a Garden and, perhaps in the fog of early dawn, his friends saw a figure through the mist that they knew was Jesus.

May we find our Lord in the fog, the mist, the darkness, the frustrations, the joy, the celebration – because Emmanuel, God with us. This year, and every year. Amen.