**Midnight Mass 2016**

Isaiah 52. 7 – 10
Hebrews 1. 1 – 12
John 1. 1 – 14

Prayer

Christmas is not a quiet festival. If by any chance you have been in the shops over the last few days your senses will have been assailed by carols and Christmas songs in renditions of all tastes and none. We too have done our fair share of carol singing – in the pub, at the Forestdale shops, in the Whitgift Centre, at the floating shelter, at the lunch club, even at PCC drinks we couldn’t resist carols round the piano. Nor is it a peaceful festival – the shops are heaving and bustling shop assistants replenish the shelves wending their difficult way between shoppers weighed down with purchases of all shapes and sizes that never quite fit the bags. Houses are filled with activity as preparations are made to receive guests, food is prepared, presents wrapped. No, it is not a quiet festival nor a peaceful one. Nor was it quiet and peaceful in Bethlehem all those years ago. The town was overflowing and there was no room for this quiet couple. Out on the hillsides it was the heavenly host that disturbed the shepherds’ peaceful night with their news and their joy.

And yet into the midst of all this comes a child, but not just any child but the child who is the author of the universe. This is the moment when time stands still, when noise and bustle cease, the moment when heaven and earth are one. This is the moment in which all that has been and all that will be is gathered into one. To borrow the words of Pierre Talec, this child is “the smile of God and tenderness toward mankind.”

The prophets wrote about the peace of this moment when the glory of the Lord would return and there would be rejoicing but even they expected more razmataz. The letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus as the way in which God has spoken to us. The child in the manger then is not just the smile and the tenderness of God but the essence of God’s communication with us and the imprint of God’s very being. So what does this say to us about the relationship that God longs to have with us, his children? William Vanstone in his beautiful hymn “Morning Glory Starlit Sky” captures something of this when he writes “No monarch he, throned in easy state to reign”. The child in the manger, God in human flesh, does not come with self-importance into an easy dwelling to a rich family but rather as the child of a young and unmarried mother who does not enjoy any status. This child comes into a world that is occupied by Roman forces and into a town where they have to take refuge in the outhouse with the animals and straw for warmth. This is the God who communicates to humanity through utter vulnerability and utter helplessness. This child is not going to have every path smoothed before him. This child comes to us completely dependent on the humanity of which he is the author. The word of God that is Jesus speaks to us as pure gift and self- offering.

The smile of God expressed in this child comes to us as unconditional love. Only that which is unconditional, without strings attached can speak of true love. Out of love we were created, out of overflowing longing to be in the midst of that creation the babe in the manger comes into the world sustained only by his mother’s milk. He comes not to rule, he comes not to force, not to coerce, not to wield power but to see what love might do in a hurting world. His coming into the world as a helpless infant says “let me be with them because I love them, let me feel their pain because I long for their healing.” The love that is birthed in the Bethlehem outhouse gives nothing less than everything.

And what of the tenderness towards humanity? We are used to thinking of shepherds as slightly comic figures. We know them from the Mystery Cycles. But is there not a deep tenderness on the part of God that the first to be told the news of the birth of the child in the manger were precisely those who were the outcasts of society, unable to take their share in religious festivals, always out of the way and looking after animals that belonged to others, despised and rejected. Their belief in the words of the angels, their visit to the outhouse in the depths of the night is a poignant expression of the child as gift to all people. The humility of God, the creator and king of all, born a baby in unpromising circumstances encounters the lowliness of the shepherds whose hearts have been burst open by the message of the angels. And is God’s tenderness not evident in the young mother, chosen for her yes to the angel, and is it not evident in Joseph, also chosen for his devotion and care. God’s tenderness towards humanity is revealed in those who are chosen to play a part in the silence of this night.

So the child in the manger is the word of God, the smile of God and the tenderness of God. But what does all this mean for a world in which visitors to a Christmas Market are mown down, a world in which refugees battle against cold with no roof over their heads and no food in their stomachs? I return to that first Christmas night and the world into which Christ was born. There was turmoil and cruelty in that world too. It was not long before Jesus became a refugee. But the babe in the manger speaks to us of the presence of God in the midst of the world, in the terror of attack, in the cold and fear of the refugee, in the heart of those who face this Christmas without a loved one as well as with us now in this church as the Christmas tree lights twinkle, as children sleep warm and cosy in their beds wondering what the morning will bring, as we share bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ to make us whole. This night all is still, this night heaven and earth meet as the angels sing and God’s love song to the world is born, the word of God as vulnerable pure gift, the smile of God as unconditional love, the tenderness of God who chooses the lowly.

No Christmas is not a quiet festival and when the morrow dawns and families gather to exchange gifts, to pull crackers and wear silly hats, to eat festive fare and drink good wine, to share the stories of the past year and even to sing the odd carol, let there be sounds of laughter and good cheer in the air, but on this night let us hold our breaths as the wonder of this birth calls us to know in our hearts that Christ is born for us, for you and for me and for the world.