

## Christmas Day 2022 - St Ambrose Church

One night I watched a television programme on Christmas decorations – the search was on for the best ‘Christmas’ decorated house in Scotland. What wonderful displays there were – lots of glitter and tinsel and lights and very creative too. Then the search was narrowed down to just four finalists. The best of the bunch. Inside and Outside. Each room in the houses was decorated even the toilet! But do you know what I noticed, not one of the finalists had a nativity scene – nothing! No crib, no nativity scene, no manger with Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus ... nothing. “Bah Humbug”, I thought.

Do you have nativity scene at home? Did you have one as a child? As some of you might remember me saying, the nativity scene ... as we know it today ... was made a focus of Christmas by Francis of Assisi – less than a thousand years ago - only Francis used real animals as some ‘brave’ congregations still do today.

We have a nativity scene here at St Ambrose – have you had close look? It’s nothing flash – which is as it should be. We often decorate our nativity scenes with tinsel and stars but let’s take a moment to think about the **reality** of a stable and food trough, a manger ...

A stable is a place for animals who smell, and poo and slop food everywhere. It might have been used by other homeless people – travellers along the way.

It is no tidy hygienic place. Straw and hay. Mud and manure.

To us it may seem holy, because Jesus’ life was to make it so, but actually it is the humblest of places. You have to be careful where you tread. It’s smelly, primitive. And we sing ‘O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord’, and there is baby in the crib, with his proud parents glowing in the lamplight, all clean and shining.

But it wasn't like that, was it? Maybe a young girl, scared and groaning and wishing she were somewhere else - anywhere else. Labour is hard, lonely and frightening in the dead of night.

And then the relief as the baby is born - into Joseph's waiting hands. A cry of relief and triumph, or just exhaustion. “What do I do now?” wonders Joseph.

We know the story by heart. We re-tell it, centuries later, and it seems so cosy, so nice.

But in the stable let’s remember the poverty, pain, bewilderment and fear, suffering and the shadow of a cross. The baby is wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger - at the end of his life Jesus will be wrapped for burial and laid in a tomb.

Our Readings began today with words from the prophet Isaiah:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light

This Prince of Peace will establish and uphold his kingdom with justice and righteousness. ....

But the whole message of Christmas is actually one of contradiction, of sharp contrasts between expectation and actuality. The reading from the prophecy of Isaiah expresses the hope of the ancient Jewish people, that God would send his Messiah to establish a kingdom in which all created things would live peacefully under his just and gentle rule. Everything that was wrong with the world would be put right! However, the hopes expressed there were never fulfilled in the history of Israel and still only partially fulfilled in our own time.

This Christmas. This year. This time and place.

A family sits grieving at the bedside of a beloved parent coming to the end of their life. Another report of domestic abuse has a police car screaming through the neighbourhood. Another dairy owner feels anxious every time a group of young people enter his shop. Another husband and father faces redundancy from his job. Another mother wonders how she will feed her ever-hungry teenagers. A young mum miscarries a longed-for baby. A young person dreads picking up their phone in case there are more bullying texts. Around a table, a family hears of the abuse of a small child at the hands of someone they should have been able to trust. Somewhere else, another person will find the contrast between the jolly Christmas scenes and their own tortured world, all too much to live with. And in a small cold house another elderly person quietly weeps in loneliness – betrayed by family abuse and neglect.

This Christmas. This year. This time and place.

This messy, dirty, cold and dark place we live in, is indeed the 'stable' where Jesus needs to be born for us, this year in this time and place. We need Jesus as a light to push back the darkness, a ruler who will enable peace and justice and kindness to overcome the evil just as surely as the people who first listened to Isaiah.

Let us remember that the Messiah revealed to the shepherds, was not the majestic or triumphalist king portrayed in Old Testament prophecies. He was a tiny baby, born in conditions of stark poverty.

For the shepherds, this was a Messiah who shared their poverty and their 'outsider' status. As our Readings from Luke's Gospel progress over the coming months, we will be shown again and again a saviour who keeps company with those on the edge

of society or regarded as sinners: the poor, the foreigners, the sick and disabled, women and children.

If we look for the Prince of Peace in the glitter and the hype that accompany our Christmas celebrations, or only in a cosy Nativity scene, then we shall inevitably be disappointed.

If we are to find our saviour, and be touched by Jesus this Christmas, this year, in our lives and neighbourhoods – if we are to find Jesus, we have to look in the places we least expect, in all the dark places where love and kindness overcome evil.

We have to look in all the places, the everyday, messy places, where glimpses of compassion and justice reveal the work of God among us. That's where the Kingdom of God is to be found.

And we will rejoice. And we will exult.

And we will praise God along with the shepherds and angels.

**And** we will go on to be the light – **we** will join Jesus in bringing light to all the dark places around us. (*place light beside the manger in the nativity scene*)

We pray ... O God, the coming of the Christ child makes all things possible and reveals the hope at the heart of things:

the hope that all shall be well, that darkness will never triumph, and that glory is in our midst.

As we stand and gaze on such love revealed to us with Mary and Joseph and with the shepherds, with friends, neighbours and strangers gathered here today, we offer you our hearts and our lives.

We commit ourselves afresh to work to make your kingdom come among the realities of the life we know.

Child in our midst, God with us: teach us to walk in your light.

**Amen**