

Christmas Midnight Mass –

Isaiah 62: 6-12

Titus 3: 4-7

Luke 2: 1-20

Well, we have made it to Christmas 2022. And boy, what a year it has been. We may have emerged out of the COVID restrictions, but not everything has not gone back to just how it was before. Some of that is good, there were some things we should not think of as normal.

You may have your own list, I know I do.

This year hasn't been a time of settling into a slightly revised way of living, for a number of reasons.

One of them is that the previous two years have left their indelible mark on most people, in one way or another. The loneliness, the forced separation, the lack of being able to meet people face to face, it cannot be understated how the simple comforting fact of physical touch, holding a hand, can be so healing and can make a connection that no amount of Zoom time can achieve. The impact on the youngest has been greater than we might appreciate. Their social and mental development was disrupted, and I know primary schools are seeing the detrimental impact in their younger pupils.

We have also seen a war in Ukraine, a war in Europe - something most of us had never thought was likely in our lifetime. The news reporting of the barbaric killing of innocent Ukrainian civilians and the most recent reports of intentional bombing of civilian power and water supplies to make life intolerable for people in Ukraine is disturbing. The pictures of towns and villages turned into desolate piles of rubble is heart-breaking. The Ukrainians we have met who have settled in and around Penicuik are either obviously traumatised or somehow have coped mentally with the need to leave their country and possibly leave the male members of their family behind.

The current levels of inflation, including the massive hikes in utility bills and increases in the cost of everyday food and grocery items, have left many people struggling to make ends meet. The levels of anxiety and stress, and also general exhaustion at having to watch every penny and pound, quickly wear many people down, having an awful impact on mental wellbeing. Demand for the services provided by food banks and the like are at the highest they have ever been. Churches, like ourselves, have opened their halls to create warm spaces, to help people reduce their own fuel bills, or keep them warm because they fear turning on their central heating.

And in the last few weeks parents will have been really worried about the costs of Christmas – not just the food but presents for children who have had their hopes heightened by commercial advertising and peer pressure.

And workers whose pay has been held down for many years have decided enough is enough. Many have chosen, reluctantly, to strike. Ironically, striking to protect public services such as the NHS, where staff were commended and clapped during the pandemic for their sacrificial service, but seem worthy of little consideration now.

And finally, this year, we have lost so many of our loved ones, with five deaths in the last two months alone, making Christmas a testing time for families in our congregation and further afield.

And yet, at Christmas time, mostly we wish to put aside all of our personal cares and worries, to turn away from the world news of wars, of acts of violence and injustice, and live in what has been called a 'Christmas bubble'. Where we focus on the spirit of peace and goodwill, focus on gifts that bring pleasure to others, maybe make a financial contribution to good causes, and reach out to a wider group of friends and relatives with our annual Christmas card and letter.

And this year, boy, do we need this period of respite. We desperately want to hear the familiar stories of the nativity, stories many of us enacted ourselves at primary school a few years ago, or maybe quite a few more years ago than that... There is security in the unchanging story, in the story of the shepherds, the angelic host, the visit to pay homage to the baby Jesus, with Mary and Joseph totally aware of this baby's future role as God's anointed one, the Messiah – but probably taken aback that when the baby was no more than a few hours old people were already turning up to see him. Poor post-partum Mary, who I am sure desperately needed some sleep!

There is absolutely nothing wrong in immersing ourselves in this nativity story, and in the carols of the Christmas season. It can be the source of a wellspring of the feelings that lead us to think differently, to perceive things differently, and to then act differently. Perhaps, for a short time, to think, perceive and act in ways that are much more closely aligned to the kingdom of God than at any other time of the year. Just think of that!

Could it be that how we feel, think and act in these days of the Christmas season gives us a real glimpse of the kingdom of God that Jesus set out to show to the people of Israel, and to us today? Let us strip away the commercialism that has corrupted Christmas; the costs of presents and expectations of spending our way to happiness, which of course is a gross lie that traps too many people. And then what do we have left, but:

- ✚ compassion for our neighbours
- ✚ goodwill to people who at other times of year we may be critical of
- ✚ peace in our hearts and wishing peace for others

There are twelve days in our liturgical season of Christmas. How can we each continue with the sentiments of the season – which all seem

to be essential elements of God's kingdom Jesus wanted to see lived out on earth, after the 6th January 2023?

As our experiences of 2022 have shown us, the world badly needs compassion, goodwill and peace, and will need it all the more in 2023, I am sure. How can we truly celebrate the birth of our Saviour in these twelve days, living a life much closer to that experienced in God's kingdom, and then continue to live that life as we move into the rest of our liturgical year?

It is a tough ask, and one that I know I am incapable of – incapable of, using my own resources. Only by making room for Jesus in the core of my being, doing I stand any chance of sustaining the Christmas spirit of compassion, goodwill and peace beyond the twelfth day of Christmas.

I feel a great sense of privilege in being your Rector. Throughout the year I see acts of love, of compassion, of goodwill, of peace, being acted out by so many members of the congregation. In the wider world, we see that humans are capable of kindness and cruelty, love and hate, of compassion and neglect, of selflessness and selfishness.

May we all, as followers of the way of life that Jesus modelled for us, welcome the baby Jesus into our hearts, and equip us to be Christ's light in the world. I wish you a happy Christmas, and a Christ-filled year ahead. The world will need it.