

And so Christmas comes.....

Listen! Be still! There's mystery here tonight! The mystery of our God. Among the starlight, the candles and the carols is mystery: *Emmanuel*, God is with us.

Preparing for Christmas is such a busy time; it's about trying to juggle work and shopping for gifts, trying to negotiate family issues, to work out who we can sit together at the dinner table without World War Three breaking out; trying to get everything ready in time for the day, trying to make the budget spin out just that little bit more. We come here tonight with our feet weary, our minds exhausted from trying to make sure everything is in place, and with our pockets empty. We gather after another complicated year, filled with its own pain and joy, filled with tears and laughter.

And so finally we come to Christmas. We welcome the sweetness of this night and all the memories that give it meaning. We welcome the magic of the occasion, and all the little traditions that make it special. We come to feed our spirit among the candles and the mystery and the wonder, as we sing the well-known carols, and the age-old story engages us once again. The wonder of this night persists, with a waiting that is holy and breathless, and with the hope that this night will be blessed.

And yet we come to Christmas knowing that among the joy and celebration there is much pain.

We come to Christmas with civilians and soldiers still dying in Iraq.

We come to Christmas, as refugees still suffer unspeakable pain in places like the Sudan and Burma.

Sometimes we see Christmas as an escape from such hard and sad things. We focus on the celebrations, the gathering of family, the sparkle in the eyes of children, the carols and candles, seeing Christmas as a few days of welcome relief from harsh reality.

With its stories of stars and angels, shepherds and magi before the crib, there's an undeniable romance to this great festival of Christmas. It might be tempting, then, to treat the whole Christmas story as a romance or as an indulgent escape from reality.

But Christmas is also about the hard and tragic. The story focuses on people who are weak and vulnerable, who are at the mercy of politics and power, and right at the heart of the story lies chaos and disorder, rejection and pain.

Here is a young family surrounded by the whiff of gossip and the possibility of scandal: is this really Joseph's child, and is Mary's virtue in question?

Here is a family in one of the world's poor nations, in an occupied land, and from a world that could be brutal and unforgiving, forced onto the road because of a government decree. Was it Bethlehem then, or is it the West Bank today?

Here is a child born in a shed with the cattle. Was it Bethlehem then, or is it Afghanistan today?

Here is a family of refugees fleeing for safety. Was it Israel and Egypt then, or a boat off Ashmore Reef today?

How do we celebrate and sing 'Joy to the World' in a world that's so imperfect? Perhaps our health is not good or the health of the people we love and care for. Perhaps we wait for test results over the holidays. Perhaps our finances are not where they should be. We need more money. Perhaps some of our relationships are difficult and in need of repair. Perhaps our job is not secure. Will we wait until all is light, until there is only peace and love in order to celebrate? Or can we defy the difficulties, and celebrate in spite of imperfection?

The Christmas story embraces all these things. It's a story that begins to make sense of believing when tragedy would seem to deny that believing. Christmas brings us the Good News of a God who is not set apart from the chaos of our lives, and of our world, with its beauty and tragedy, but a God who chose to be born into our chaos, immersed in our pain and difficulty, our God whose being is found in every joy and every struggle of human existence.

In the Christmas story we find a God who is present in a parent's fear, in the cries of birth and a child's vulnerability, a mother's heart-ache and a family's fragility. God born into our world through the messy, difficult and dangerous human birth process. God born into a world that had no room for him, that rejected him. In this story we find a God who knows about the smell of poverty, the taste of betrayal and even the fear of death. The angel announced that Mary would bear a special child, who would be the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. This child would bring love and joy and peace into the world. Yet where is that peace? The Christ Child became a disappointment – he didn't save his people from the occupation, he brought them no peace on a national scale. And so they rejected him.

Jesus constantly defied their expectations. Instead of bringing peace with a sword, or with a gun, he brings love and joy and peace into the world, by changing us. This is where a changed world starts this Christmas time. The Christ Child says to us this Holy Night and forevermore, this is how the world can change; take my love and peace and let it change *you*, not *apart* from your life and your circumstances, but within them. So simple, yet so hard to understand and harder still to do.

But this is the Good News of Christmas for us this night. Emmanuel: God with us in every aspect of human living, in our joy and pain, in our tears and laughter.

Emmanuel: God born into our world this night; recognized by simple shepherds, welcomed by the very angels in heaven, with whom we sing Glory to God in the highest!

And so Christmas comes. We pause once again among the candles and the carols. We pause once again before we return to the turkey and the tinsel, and the family celebrations. We pause and remember that there is mystery here tonight.

Our God is with us.

Christmas Eve 2007