Luke 2: 8-20;Midnight Mass 2018

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I’m going to start with a confession: for some reason, the world seems to me to be a bit darker this year. In the past, it has been relatively easy to dismiss the events of the world as being remote from our comfortable existence. War in Afghanistan, or the Syrian situation, even North Korea and Russia – they are all so ‘apart’, so outside our experience that while we express concern about them, we cannot even come close to empathising with the humans, the men and women who live in those places and go through those experiences. But with knife crime, and the Brexit mess – whichever side you’re on, it’s still a mess – and people who speak the same language we do trying to erect walls to keep out people who aren’t the same as them – whatever that means………. Somehow our world feels infinitely less secure. And less nice to be part of.

And so the angels’ shouts of peace on earth seems more like a hopeless wish than a blessing and we who gather to sing carols, light our candles, and hear the Christmas story seem so very small and powerless against the backdrop of this troubled world.

But that’s when a part of Luke’s nativity gospel hit me. We have all heard this story countless times but this year it struck me differently: In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

What struck me was that the events Luke describes also seem incredibly small. In all seriousness, what could Emperor Augustus or the Governor Quirinius possibly care about a pregnant teenager, an old carpenter or a bunch of wandering shepherds? Mary, Joseph, and the rest – were all ordinary people; incredibly small compared with these rulers. And yet Luke declares that whether these rich and powerful leaders care or not – or even notice or not – even so, the events he describes in detail are going to change the whole world.

It’s a ridiculous, outlandish claim, when you think about it: that the birth of a baby to an unmarried teenager amid all the squalor of a grimy but ordinary little town could possibly matter. And yet there, in a nutshell, is the promise of the Gospel: that God regularly shows up where we least expect God to be.

So though this world may be dark, it is not forsaken or forgotten, and the headlines we read and worry about will have their day and then fade again – unlike this story that we’ve been telling now for 2000 years. God loves this world and all the people in it. And God will not give up on it…or us.

So the story told by Luke reminded me that the Gospel has always been set amid world events that seemed intimidatingly huge at the time.

And then, against that, we hear the mysterious words of John’s gospel, as we did tonight. Words that, no matter how many times and ways I try to invest them with meaning or sense, still end up holding a beauty and mystery within themselves that is breath-taking time and time and time again.

And towards the end of that Prologue to John’s gospel, he says: No one has ever seen God.

But it doesn’t mean God isn’t there – in the intricacy of nature, in the wonder of childbirth, in the power of waves….

Yet it can be so hard to see God amid the grim headlines. True also for those who suffer the private pain of broken relationships, or dying loved ones, loneliness, illness, job loss, mental health concerns. And sometimes we get so caught up in the day-to-day plodding through life just making ends meet that we find it hard imagining that God could possibly make a difference in our world. Sure, maybe we believe in God in a general sense, as I find often when I visit people who are not habitual church-goers - but sensing God’s presence – let alone seeing God – in the nitty-gritty of our mundane lives can be a big ask.

But John goes on: It is God the only Son who has made him known. Perhaps the problem isn’t that it is impossible to see God, but rather that we are inclined to look in all the wrong places. Rather than speculate about God’s existence, maybe we should instead look to Jesus, born of a woman just as we all were. And when we do that, we see and have the possibility to encounter the God who became flesh, who took on our human lot and a life in many ways like ours, in order that we might have hope that the world might become a better place.

When you think about it, the Christmas Gospel message of hope, grace, and peace seems distinctly improbable. That the Creator of the cosmos would even know we exist, let alone love and care for us? But somehow, or for just that reason, this is the story we all keep coming back every year to hear, hoping, even when hope is hard, that it is the one true story we will encounter among all the fake news. That truth that God really did and does so love the world….

So hear and feel this story, not just in the words of the Bible, but in the experience of this whole church service – not as an old corny favourite that we hear year after year and think we know, but let it seep into all the dark corners of your soul; the places where the world’s darkness seems much more powerful than the light. This story brings light to those dark places, hope to those who have none, and the promise of peace to those who long for it.

**Amen**