

## A Reflection from Revd Ali for Christmas Night

As I was preparing to speak to you tonight, the words of the beautiful and haunting carol 'O Holy Night' were rattling around my head. You know how it is, no matter how hard you try to ignore a so-called 'ear-worm', you find yourself humming it at the strangest times. So, I decided to embrace the song and share some reflections about it, and our Bible readings that we heard tonight. (Isaiah 9: 2 – 7 and Luke 2: 1 – 20)

The carol starts "O holy night! The stars are brightly shining; it is the night of the dear Saviour's birth". The hymn, paraphrasing the proclamation of the angels to the shepherds on the hills outside Bethlehem. Luke's Gospel tells us that the shepherds were living in the fields keeping watch over their flocks. The angels, God's heralds, God's messengers came, not to the great and the good, but to the very ordinary. People like you and me. Working people who did what they had to do to survive. In first Century Palestine, shepherds were on the lowest rung of society. They were sometimes considered untrustworthy and often ignored. A necessary, but unworthy adjunct to an agrarian community. But God hadn't forgotten or ignored them. Even though they were just going about their business, trying to make ends meet. It is to them, that God opens the heavens and proclaims the great good news of the birth of the child that would change everything. A tangible expression of the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God. The Word had been made flesh, and it is to the lowly that the announcement was first made.

So, they "fall on their knees, O hear the angel voices". They are touched by the transformational love of God. God, who reaches down from heaven and breaks into human history in the form of a vulnerable child. The shepherds follow the angels' instructions and travel in faith and wonder into the town. There they find the Messiah, the promised one, the culmination of all Israel's hopes and dreams lying, not in a palace in a crib of gold - but in a room warmed by the breath and bodies of farm animals. His young mother had wrapped him in strips of cloth and made him comfortable in a bed of straw. This miraculous child was like them. The hopes and dreams were for them. The salvation offered, was for them. They were included in the great good news for everyone. The world that "long lay in sin and error pining", the world that oppressed and ignored them, had been changed by God's grace and extraordinary love. "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices". The incarnation changed the course of human history. No longer were the earth and its people condemned. There was a new hope. A new promise. A new covenant through that tiny, vulnerable child. There was a new way to live. A new way to live in love and peace with God through Godself. "O night divine!" indeed.

But that isn't the end of the shepherd's story. They are transformed by God's love. They are transformed by coming close to the incarnation of Godself, into apostles. They went from Bethlehem giving glory to God for the miracle that God had achieved. Not just in the incarnation, but in them too. They told others of that holy night. They too, spread the great good news of God's love for humanity, with everyone they met. We don't know their individual stories; they are always just described as 'the shepherds'. But coming into the presence of God is always transformational. They were "led by the light serenely beaming". They could have ignored the angels. They could have so been bowed down by their lack of importance, their lowly status, their invisibility to society. But no, they were led by faith. Faith in the promises of God. Faith in the promises shared with the people of God by the prophets throughout their history. Faith that God had not forgotten even the lowest of the low. Faith in God's love for all of God's creation. Their personal history, their disappointments, the hardness of their lives were not enough to hold them back from hearing the good news. The good news that was, and is, for everyone!

Luke tells us, that all who heard the shepherds' testimony were amazed at what the shepherds told them. I wonder if that was a mixture of incredulity at the messenger and wonder at the message. God chose to come into the world not through the affluent or powerful, but through the ordinary. God's message of transformational love was shared, not by the political or religious elite, but by the poor and looked-down upon. The Incarnation at the Nativity turns upside-down,

assumptions about the superiority of people because of accidents of birth or wealth. The Incarnation at the Nativity tells us that the massive divide between the rich and the poor is never acceptable or inevitable. There is a different way. God's way. A way of love and peace for all of God's beloved children. A way to live our lives in the knowledge of the great good news that is the Saviour's birth.

There is still massive inequality in the world. There is still darkness and hatred. But Christmas, that holy night, is still great good news for the world. It is still good news because it offers each of us a different way to live. We can choose to allow the mystery of Christmas to change us. We can choose to come into the presence of the Christ Child and allow God's transformational love to impact on our lives. We can accept the truth that God loved each of us so much, that God sent Godself into the world to offer us that new way to live. But it is a choice. We have to make a choice to allow the Christ Child to be born in us tonight. We have to choose to open our hearts and our minds to the love of God expressed by the Incarnation.

Luke tells us, that Mary pondered the things that the shepherds told her in her heart. Can we, this Christmas, ponder the truth of the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ? Can we too, allow ourselves and our lives to be changed by God? Is this holy night, the night we give ourselves to God and let our lives be a witness to God's love in the world?

If we, like Mary, are prepared to say 'yes' to God, our lives *will* change. If we, in our ordinariness, are prepared to accept the extraordinary and outrageous gift of love offered at Christmas, then we too will be part of the movement of light and love in the world that will, eventually, lead to the transformation of the world. God knows that it won't be easy. God knows that change is difficult. God knows that transformation can be painful and costly. But "the King of kings who lay thus in that lowly manger, in all our trials born to be our Friend". God promises that Christ will be with us. Christ will give us the words and the work to do. "He knows our need, he guardeth us from danger". Christ with us, Emmanuel!

So, is tonight, this holy night, the night when we too hear the great good news that is for everyone, and respond to the call that God has on each of our lives? Will we too share the transformational love and light of Christ in the world?

"Behold your King, before him lowly bend!" Amen

### **O Holy Night: by Placide Cappeau.**

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining;  
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth.  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope – the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!  
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!  
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!  
O night, O holy night, O night, O night divine!

Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,  
With glowing hearts by his cradle we stand.  
So led by light of a star so sweetly gleaming,  
Here come the wise men from Orient land.  
In all our trials born to be our friend,  
He knows our need, he guardeth us from danger.  
Behold your King, before him lowly bend!  
Behold your King, before him lowly bend!

## A Reflection from Revd Ali for Christmas Morning

Well, despite the best efforts of the Coronavirus, we have celebrated the Advent season and now we are here on this holiest of days, when we celebrate the birth of the Christ Child.

We might not have been able to sing our favourite carols this year, but we have still been moved by the glorious voices of angels declaring the great good news of joy to the world and peace to all on earth. We might not have been able to join in with Nativity plays or gathered in great crowds with tinsel, mulled wine and mince pies, but the Christ Child has been born, Christmas is here. God with us, Emmanuel! So, to celebrate this most wonderful day we are going to play bingo!

(The game is introduced.) You need to listen out for words on your card and mark them off. When you have marked off all the squares on your card jump up and say 'And Peace to His People on Earth'. Well, it's Christmas. At last – the time of waiting is ended - Hooray!

We've been waiting so long for Christmas haven't we? We've all been eyeing up the presents under the tree. Trying not to eat the Christmas tree chocolates. Looking forward the next mince pie. Maybe having too much mulled wine. Shopping for gifts and maybe cooking some special treats. And why? Well, because it's Christmas and Christmas is a celebration. It has been a difficult year for everyone so this year so we are all in need of a good celebration and gathering together here in church today is very special. We have gathered to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We know that this is the most important thing about Christmas. We know that Mary was visited by an angel and was told she was going to give birth to God's child and was to name him Jesus.

We know that Joseph, took Mary to Bethlehem, the home of his ancestors, for a census. To be honest we don't really know if there was an innkeeper. But we know that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a room where animals sleep: possibly some sort of stable. There may have been oxen or sheep or even a donkey present.

We know that shepherds on the hillside were the first people to hear of the Messiah's birth. A host of angels told them. We know that they found him wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

We also know that sometime later, Wise Men from the East came and humbled themselves before him, giving him gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.

Such a wonderful story, the greatest story ever told! But why did the shepherds and the Wise Men treat this little baby boy as a great king?

What was so special about all this that over half the population of the world celebrate Christmas?

I wonder, I wonder if you can imagine a time when there was nothing – nothing at all. It's really hard. Before the world began, everything was in darkness. All was quiet and there was nothing there. Then God created light. And God's great creation came into being as the universe was born. And God watched and waited. Then the planets came. Our own planet, earth, a beautiful blue planet spinning round its own star. And God watched and waited. And on the earth, there grew beautiful plants and hundreds and thousands of different creatures. Some swam in the sea, some walked on the ground and some flew in the air. And God watched and waited.

And one day, because the world had got itself into a bit of a mess, and the human beings he had created had forgotten how to be his people, God decided to wait no longer. And God came, as a baby, a human being to live among us. God who made all the stars and all the planets and all the creatures decided to come and live as a human baby. It was such a wonderful, great occasion, that the whole of creation joined in the celebration. God living in a manger, Jesus son of God and son of Mary. God came down to earth to tell us how we can enter God's Kingdom by following God's way of love

And so, at Christmas we don't just celebrate the birth of a baby boy.

We celebrate the fact that God became a person like you and me. We celebrate the fact that God was with us. That's what Emanuel means: God with us.

That this amazing, unfathomable, all loving, all knowing, all creating, being who we call God, could love us so much that he sent his Son to be with us because God loves us.

So, here today, we're celebrating: we're listening to carols: we're having a birthday party for Jesus: and soon we're going to remember all that Jesus is, as we come together to share bread and wine. But most of all we join with the angels by saying together: glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth.

Amen