

It is truly wonderful to have you all here with us as we celebrate the wondrous night – which tells a story of hope, love and community which we are invited to experience. Christmas is of course about Jesus – and the coming of God into the world in human form. But this coming – this birth brings light to so much more than the birth of one tiny child – it brings the birth of hope!

It is a night that is full of excitement.

For the past 20 or so years I have been living in the UK – and one of the things that I bizarrely looked forward too was the competition for meaningful Christmas Advertising. While obviously commercials to get us to buy things for Christmas, the big English chains seemed to compete to tell a story and present a value they associated with Christmas. About 8 years ago there was this amazing Advert about Excitable Edgar who was a lovable but dangerous dragon, who desperately wants to join in the Christmas Celebrations. Every time Edgar tries to join in with the Christmas events, he breaths out fire in his excitement and destroys something. But he has one friend who is determined to ensure he is not left out – she finds him a job where his flames are not a danger but can add to the celebrations. He lights the Christmas pudding.

I love this story, not only because I relate to his ability to knock things over in the excitement, but also because Christmas is so much about finding our place in the story of Christmas – finding our voice, knowing that we are each welcome and having a seat at the table.

God came to earth in Jesus so that we can see the true wonder and beauty of God – a God who offers hospitality to all – who notices even the lowliest – who showed each of us that we are included and loved.

Each of the characters in the nativity story tonight are invisible or excluded and yet God draws them in – shows them that they are loved and offers them hospitality.

First we have Mary and Joseph, who by their race are oppressed. They are a conquered people who are now under Roman rule. And this is not just about occupation of their land, it is also occupation of their spirit. The Roman leaders modelled themselves as divine beings and expected their subjects not just to serve them but to worship them. And within the oppressed group of people we have a young woman who has disgraced her family when she is found to be pregnant. And it is to this woman – excluded, powerless and oppressed that God choose to bear God's son. This is no accident. The Christmas message of the incarnation is one about inclusion and welcome – and Mary and Joseph are part of this symbolism.

Then we have the shepherds. The shepherds are so outcast in this society they are not even called into the census – no one wants to count them – or inquire to the tax they are to pay – they are part of the lowest set of within this ancient community –

and yet it is to them that the angel appears and it is they who come and worship Jesus as King, in a way they would never kneel before the emperor of Rome.

The shamed, the excluded and the lowly are the key players in this narrative. And even the Magi, wise men who come from distant lands are foreigners, rather than locals – and it is these foreigners who also come to recognise that God is in the midst of this community.

God shows us a vision of a manger – most likely in the front room of the family home. Stables in this part of the Middle East, at this point in history, were usually the front, or lower level of the home, and the family slept in rooms above. This way the animals were protected, but it also formed a natural insulation. Despite what our vision of a stable might be, it was most likely clean and warm, and well cared for. Animals were a big investment and needed to be protected. Despite this it is still not a maternity ward!

And so it is that God comes not to the palace, not to the included, but rather God is born in the front room of an exiled community, and revealed to those who no one sees, and brings glory and hope to those who felt that their home and faith had been taken from them.

The problem is that this story is so familiar that we forget what an extraordinary message it is. A message which invites us to notice and include! What does this crib say to us this night about who we notice in our community? What does this crib say to us about who we welcome or share a meal with? What does this crib say to us about the love we share and who we value?

In our community homeless people are fed each day by local charities. In our community live people who have not seen a visitor, not spoken to a person, not left their house for weeks or months. In our community are housed new refugee families. And even in this street, maybe even in this church, there will be some who will spend tomorrow, and everyday alone.

But this crib, this Christ child asks us to see – asks us to notice and invites us to act. To love our neighbour and remember that Christmas, and our Christian faith, is for sharing. It is a gift worth more than any other riches – the gift of being loved and belonging. Of being part of God's family however we may relate to the rest of society.

This is why God came into the world. And it is a message we can be excited about. For the gift of Christmas is that each of us is loved, and each of us is included – we each have a place at the table. And if we each believed this – the world truly would be a better place – for it is this which is the light which Christ brings this and every

Christmas. That we are loved, and that love is shared with others, on earth and in heaven.

On this night, which is so familiar in so many ways, we are reminded to look beyond our first glimpse and grasp hold of how extraordinary this night truly is. We are invited to feel the excitement as if we were a child, or of Edgar, or the angels and shepherds. The night humanity knew the extent of God's love for us - that God might send his son so that we might all be included. What a wonderful and perfect gift.

As we celebrate this Christmas night - my wish is that as each of us looks into the crib - we might know the love God has for us - and accept it - and share it - on this night and always.

May you have a happy and blessed Christmas!

Amen.