

St Marc, Grenoble
Christmas Day, Saturday 25th December 2021
Isaiah 9: 2 - 7
Luke 2: 1 - 14
'Glory to God'

Good Morning, a Very Happy Christmas - to everyone here and, especially, to those joining us on Zoom.

PRAY

It's a joy to be here - amazing when I remember that Julia and I arrived here exactly one year ago tomorrow. Led by God - no star, but plenty of other guidance! We arrived with a spirit of hope and joy, that God can still use us, and our ministry in this church.

The good news is we're still here! There have been challenges - there always are. It feels longer than a year - there's plenty still to do. We believe God brought us here for a purpose, He's poured out His grace on us - we feel truly blessed. Hopefully you feel the same.

But, let's get back to this Christmas: Does anyone have a Christmas Day reflection to share?? A favourite Christmas moment so far; or a special Gift you've received?? What might hit your 'Happy Button' in the year ahead??

It hasn't been an easy year for many people, with the challenges of Covid, Brexit and the subsequent flood of new regulations and laws.

As I reflected, I wondered what would have happened if Jesus was born in France now. If His parents were unable to find anywhere to stay, would anyone offer help? Would they be classified as 'homeless'? Apparently there are around 300,000 people classified as homeless in France, (slightly more than in England) - and an estimate of 30,000 rough sleepers in Paris alone.

Things were similar in Bethlehem around 2020 years ago – as we heard in our Gospel reading everyone had been ordered to go to their ancestral town to **register**, but many people had nowhere to stay.

Matthew's Gospel also tells us, after Jesus' birth, the Holy family were warned in a dream to flee from Herod – fled to Egypt and became refugees.

There are still millions of refugees in the world – many risking their lives to escape from terror, intimidation and, tragically, hundreds die in the process.

Few governments seem to care, refugees are welcome in very few countries. Here in Europe, governments argue about quotas of refugees they may take in. No-one seems to notice that each number in a quota is a human life.

But, let's look for some Good News...

A year or so ago, my friend and professor, Eugene Peterson, died. I studied several courses with him at theological college. He was a great teacher, a wonderful storyteller, who always had a warm smile on his face. His lectures were compulsive listening.

As well as being an unusual Biblical scholar, (he translated 'The Message', a starkly modern translation of the Bible). It's less well known that he founded and pastored a Presbyterian church in Baltimore for 29 years.

He tried to help his congregation understand the Gospel in ways that related directly to their lives and circumstances. He taught them to apply its teaching to their own situation. I regard him as a paragon - an outstanding example.

Recently I read his book 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', based on the sermons he preached there. I came across a chapter entitled '**For unto us a child is born**'. It's relevant this morning.

I'd like to read 3 paragraphs: (Part 3, Chapter 4, p.138.) which made me chuckle. Eugene referred to Isaiah 9: vv. 2 – 7, our first reading today.

He pointed out that, in difficult times, you need to devise a plan of action that takes God, and His activity into account, or you're not doing the right thing.

He wrote 'The basic, life changing, mind transforming, spirit redeeming reality is not what we do, but what God does. He has done it. It is given. And the giving continues. **'Unto us a child is born, to us a son is given'**.

God begins His gift of redemption, in the same place where all our lives started – with a birth. Isaiah tells us that this child is no ordinary child; he says (as translated in The Message):

'For a child has been born – for us! The gift of a son – for us! He'll take over the running of the world. His names will be: Amazing Counsellor, Strong God, Eternal Father. Prince of Wholeness. His ruling authority will grow and there'll be no limits to the wholeness He brings (and we really need wholeness??!)

He'll put His kingdom on a firm footing and keep it going with fair dealing and right living, beginning now and lasting always.

Isaiah gives us a glimpse of eternity with God: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.' We need to follow that light!

Jesus was born on earth as one of us, He came in difficult times – like those we're experiencing – He knows the difficulties we're living through, because He's lived through similar times himself. (That's really encouraging.)

Jesus died on a cross in order to conquer sin, and the grave; but He rose again and lives to lead and guide us. God promises that Jesus, Emmanuel, God with Us, will return to redeem us and take over running the world.

The birth of a Son, whom we welcome today, is God's gift of Hope for the future; our special Promise – from God.

However bad things seem now, we have the assurance Jesus will return in Glorious Majesty; Mighty to save ... And who's He going to save? Yes, 'The people who walked in darkness, who've seen a great light'

We have God's promise that, whatever happens, we can live in the light, the peace and joy of our Saviour: Amazing Counsellor, Strong God, Eternal Father ... and Prince of Wholeness.

Eugene said: 'although Uncle Ernie was a lovable rogue, when he was in church he asked the right question ... 'How much did YOU get??' 'Everybody gets something; A plate full of money is passed in front of you; the Word of God is opened before you; the praises of God are sung around you; prayers to God direct and bless you.

With all of that, surely YOU got something, didn't you?... But how much??'

The answer to that question lies in our response to the gift we are offered.

I want to soak up the gift of wonder and hope of that Great Light; not just this Christmas and through 2022, but throughout the life that's given to me, until I meet my Saviour face to face.

It's the gift that destroys the doom and gloom of man made hate and despair. It offers Joy and Peace; the Wholeness and Hope, which only Jesus brings -

What a wonderful gift it is - **Happy Christmas!!**

Let's pray ...