

Christmas St Stephen's 11.30pm John 1: 3-5
24/25.12.21

“What has come into being through him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Walking through Bond Street in London, a man saw a beautiful vase and simply had to possess it. When he received it at home, he placed it in pride of place in his sitting room, yet it was of such outstanding beauty that it made the rest of the room look tawdry and drab. He bought a new carpet and curtains, stripped the furniture, giving it a fresh coat of varnish. The precious thing led to the transformation of the room.

Sadly, too many people at this time of year are guilty of doing just the opposite. We hide the precious thing beneath the ephemera of our Christmas celebrations, so that what is transitory and of secondary importance assumes first place; and what should be transforming becomes hidden or is ignored.

It's not that celebrating Christmas is wrong in itself. After all, Christ likened the Kingdom of Heaven to a dinner party; he went to the wedding in Cana and no doubt enjoyed himself there; and he went to numerous suppers with friends and foes. Even though we are able to enjoy the traditional festivities, we should not forget the heart of the matter and the reason why we are celebrating. At the heart of Christmas is the great and mighty wonder of Christ's birth – God becoming incarnate and living a human life alongside us to draw us back into fellowship.

In spite of the commercialism Christmas has become, God continues to attract our attention to this gift of himself to humanity through the very things which so often draw us away – the Christmas cards, and carols, the Christmas story and the Nativity Plays, indeed the very name of Christmas, all are able suddenly to awaken in people what it is all about. God continues to reach out to gain our attention and offers each one of us his transforming love.

But love must be allowed to work. If we would see our lives transformed and the deep longings of our hearts satisfied in a way that nothing else can, we have to turn to God and open ourselves to his love. But today, this is counter-intuitive, for what drives so many is a concern with self – fitness, fame and fortune. Earlier this week, the Times had a headline which read: “With ‘lifestyle choice’ trumping the interests of children, abuse and neglect are out of control.” Selfish desires all too often stifle the longings of the heart.

To come at this another way is to ask the question: “What is faith all about?” It's the belief that there is God with whom we can have an intimate relationship which is defined as love. This is the key word ‘relationship’. We were created for love – love of God and love of our neighbour. This love builds harmony and creates community. It enables people to find fulfilment in relationship with others and with God, and to use their gifts constructively, and to do so within an ethical framework defined by that love.

To turn one's back on God and pursue one's own ends irrespective of the effects on others is to break this relationship, which is the very essence of sin. Acting selfishly creates discord and destroys community. This is the battle we all have to face, this propensity to selfishness, which is sin. Most of the problems we face, both personally and nationally, are the result of selfish actions. Try as we might, we cannot overcome this by ourselves, but only through the power of God's love shown to us in Jesus Christ.

No wonder that St John writes that the light of Christ entered the darkness of ignorance and selfishness, and though the very nature of that selfishness tried to quench that light, it failed and so the light continues to shine on in the darkness.

That darkness can be seen in the murderous actions of the Taliban in Afghanistan and in the selfishness of western nations in not supplying adequate Covid vaccines to Africa; in the acts of violence, vandalism and rowdyism in many places both here and the UK, often due either to boredom, or frustration, or a sense of being left behind. Then there is the desire for power and to hold on to power internationally – Russia trying to impose its will on the Ukraine; China suppressing the Weagers; the Burmese military imposing its will on the people.

It doesn't have to be so. There is light in the darkness, pointing the way - the light of Christ. To walk in the light means walking towards the light and by means of that light. It saddens me that so many people who have been baptised, and not a few confirmed, seldom seek to build up their faith within the life of the Church – for the gospel knows nothing about solitary religion. If the light of Christ is to counter the darkness of our world, it will be through us and people like us, actively praying and living a life of service strengthened by the life and worship of the Christian community.

It's often said that Christmas is for children; but that's wrong. Christmas is for hard men like the shepherds who came to worship the infant Jesus – men who lived out their lives on the hills in all weathers and faced many dangers and who were often treated almost as outlaws by the great and good. It is for learned men like the Magi, who were not ashamed to bow down to a small baby in worship and honour, and in whom they saw the hope of the world. And it's for you and me as we try to make sense of the age in which we live, a sure light to guide us.

We are now left with the question "Have you see Christ's glory? Do you see in this baby the hope of the world? And if the answer is 'yes' – what then?"