

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern Christmas 2015

It is always a joy to see so many gather to worship each Christmas. Thank you to all those who have worked to prepare the Church, cleaning, arranging flowers, setting things out so that our worship could flow and our celebrations bring us comfort and joy.

Many people think the story of Christmas is not important any more. It's become controversial to teach children carols at school, or tell them the story. And yet, here *we* are drawn again to hear about the manger, the angels, the shepherds and the wise men, the murderous king – all these players in a real life drama, still challenging and affirming us over two thousand years later.

Or to put it another way, as one witty vicar has, 'A long time ago, in a Galilee far, far away'.

By remembering what has come to pass in Bethlehem of Judea we are taking up God's invitation to inhabit this story, to make our own this memory which is ever present. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is God - our inadequate name for the mysterious yet compelling source of life and love – God coming among us, one of us so that we might know ourselves and God through the humanity we share with Jesus; so that humanity and divinity, earth and heaven might for ever more be one interwoven reality though we struggle to see more than glimpses.

Jesus' birth gives a new and unique shape to God's presence among us, in the best of times, and in the darkest and hardest of times. Jesus' birth is a source of blessing for the world, whether the world pays attention or not. God could not contain himself and overflowed with life and love for we poor humans in the midst of our inhumanity towards one another. Christmas says God so longs for us to experience this blessing in abundance that God has given his blessing flesh and blood that we might see for ourselves what God makes possible.

So, instead of a Christmas wish list of things, I have a Christmas blessing list for you. It comes with my prayers for you all. I know that some will gather around family meal tables and feel the absence of someone who has died this past year; others will be including a new life born, or a new member of the family through marriage or commitment, or perhaps reunion or reconciliation.

Christmas can become a 'thin place', a space where the veil between this world and the next is lifted just long enough for us to glimpse God and long for more. Millions of Christians fleeing persecution in the lands where this story first took root will keep Christmas this year in climates and cultures far from their familiar ways. May they find welcome and blessing, and renewed hope in the welcome of strangers.

God bless you with the same **love** in your hearts that shone on the baby Jesus' face, the love that his mother Mary had for him, her first-born son. May you know the blessing of being loved and in turn, show your face in love to family, to neighbours,

to strangers and rejected ones. May you know the blessing of discovering the humanity we all share when we let go the suspicion and fear that divides neighbour from neighbour, nation from nation.

God bless you with the same **hope** in your hearts that was born in Bethlehem long ago, hope that God's plan for the world will bring peace for everyone. May you know the blessing of trusting that peace is possible if we seek justice and reject violence as any kind of response to anyone, anytime and anywhere.

God bless you with the same **courage** in your hearts that Joseph needed to rescue his family from a murderous tyrant; courage not to turn a blind eye all the cruelty and injustice in the world; courage to speak for the silenced ones, and courage to leave if necessary and seek safe haven elsewhere, as have millions since we last kept this feast.

God bless you with the same **glory** in your hearts that the shepherds saw when the angels sang to them at midnight, glory that sees God's goodness and beauty in the natural world around us. Goodness and beauty we risk destroying unless we wake up to our plunder of the earth's gifts intended for all people, not just for the wealthy few.

God bless you with the same **peace** in your hearts that the angels promised with God's goodwill to all humankind, peace enough to share with worried and weary friends; peace that builds human community and peace that dwells within each human heart.

God bless you with the same **generosity** in your hearts that the wise men showed when they brought their gifts, generosity that stretches beyond known limits in kindness to the poor and needy. Generosity that does not judge, though it may hold to account, and which transforms lives and futures.

God bless you with the same **faith** in your hearts that Christians throughout the ages have found in the baby of Bethlehem. Faith that will grow through good times and hard times, faith that will bring you to your knees in grateful adoration. Faith, which is trust, in a God willing to come as a vulnerable baby that we might grow into the full stature of our humanity remade in his image.

May you know these blessings, not just this Christmas but each day, each step along the way, and may your Christmas be holy and full of blessing.

Colleen O'Reilly  
Vicar