

The hope of the world

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Christmas Eve 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (Midnight service)

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

What's your favourite Christmas pop song?

It seems that one of the top favourites is Mariah Carey's *All I want for Christmas*:

I don't want a lot for Christmas.

There is just one thing I need.

*I don't care about the presents
underneath the Christmas tree.*

*I just want you for my own,
More than you could ever know.*

Make my wish come true:

All I want for Christmas is you.

How do Christmas presents work in your family? When you were a child, did you write letters to Santa saying what you wanted for Christmas? What about now? Do you make a list of things you would like and share it with loved ones? If I could wave a magic wand and grant you any 3 wishes, what would they be?

I asked this question to children at a couple of primary schools, and there were a variety of answers. Some just wanted more presents. Others wanted to have a good time with their families this Christmas. Some wanted peace and justice in the world.

Let's spend a moment thinking about the first Christmas. I wonder what 3 wishes Mary and Joseph would have chosen that first Christmas in Bethlehem. I'm sure that a safe birth for their baby in a safe place would have been the first thing on their minds. Somehow, in spite of there being no room at the inn, they found somewhere, and Mary's first child was born safely. The place they were staying in didn't remain safe for very long, according to Matthew's gospel, as King Herod tried to kill Jesus, perceiving him as a threat to his own power. And today we're very conscious that there are so many people in the world who don't have security, because of war, natural disaster, poverty or persecution. Let's pray for them this Christmas.

I think their second wish might have been that they and their baby would be accepted by their families, after the rather unusual circumstances of Mary's pregnancy. It seems from snippets of information in the gospels that this did come true. But many families today are divided and torn apart through misunderstanding, addiction or abuse. Let's remember them this Christmas.

And maybe, if Mary and Joseph were thinking about the world around them, they might have wished for freedom for their people, who were under the control of the Roman Empire, whose Emperor had called for everyone to be registered for tax, causing Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem. The world that Jesus was born into was no happier or more secure than the world we live in today.

Christmas carols often seem to like just a bit of escapism into a magical world – choirs of angels singing, shepherds and

wise men from the East coming to pay homage to the baby born to be King. But those beautiful moments are an important part of it, because amid all the uncertainty and the danger that Mary and Joseph faced, there were glimpses of a divine plan behind it all.

O little Town of Bethlehem

Just before Christmas 1865, a few days after his 30th birthday, an American vicar called Phillips Brooks was visiting the Holy Land and spent a few hours in Bethlehem. Inspired by what he saw, he later wrote a hymn which has become part of a traditional Christmas on both sides of the Atlantic. The first verse reads:

O Little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

Today, I doubt that many people have heard of Rev Phillips Brooks. But the words he wrote still speak to millions about the deep mystery of Christmas. In these times of uncertainty, “the hopes and fears of all the years” have a particular relevance. For nearly 3 years war has been raging in Ukraine, and for more than 14 months in Gaza. Donald Trump is about to become president of the most powerful nation in the world, and many are deeply concerned about how he will respond to these two situations.

Meanwhile in the UK the economy is still in trouble. Will the new Labour government be able to pull it round?

Each of us will have our own, smaller, problems to deal with – but they may seem much bigger to us as we have to negotiate them.

The prophecy of Isaiah which we heard just now was a message of hope in the face of uncertainty and the threat of war.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

Isaiah goes on to herald the birth of a child who will become a king who will rule with justice and righteousness, bringing in a kingdom of endless peace.

Christians see the birth of Jesus as the fulfilment of that prophecy. He is the light of life which John refers to at the beginning of his Gospel. Jesus is the light of the world, who brings hope in a world where darkness seems to reign. The hymn “O little town of Bethlehem” says that with the birth of Jesus an “everlasting light” was shining in dark streets.

It also claims that “the hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight”. What is the source of hope? the writer of the hymn is clear: it is Jesus.

In the birth of Jesus, God has entered our world, sharing in all the joys and sorrows of human life. Jesus grew up in an ordinary town, learning the trade of a carpenter from

Joseph. He had brothers and sisters, neighbours and customers. Until he was 30, no one outside the little town of Nazareth had heard of Jesus. Two thousand years later, we are celebrating his birth.

So who is this Jesus? In John's gospel, he is described as the Light of the world. John writes that "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it". There is hope, whatever difficulties and uncertainties we may be facing. There is hope because Jesus is our light. He is the Word of God, the ultimate expression of who God is in human form. He came to set us free from despair, from selfishness and from fear, through the power of God's love. And at this time we need him more than ever.

I wonder where in your life you see light and where you see darkness? Where is there harmony, goodwill, love and trust? Where is there fear, mistrust or despair? Are we willing to trust God for the future, for ourselves, for those we love, and for the world?

The Bible describes Jesus as the Light of the World. But we have a choice, whether to walk in the darkness of selfishness, despair and fear, or to come to the light. How we respond to Jesus will make all the difference. In St John's Gospel it says that "He came to his own, but his own people did not receive him. But to those who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." The promise is that through Jesus we can all have an intimate relationship with the Creator of the universe as our heavenly Father.

We can choose whether to stumble on in the light of our own wisdom, or receive the light of Christ.

Perhaps this Christmas might be a good time to explore for yourself what receiving Christ means. There are free copies of the booklet “Why Christmas?” near the door of the church – please take one if you’d like to.

I don’t know what you want for Christmas, but in my experience, there is nothing that can compare to the gift of knowing God’s love for myself through Jesus. When we begin to realise what Christmas is really all about, maybe we will want to turn to Jesus and say, “All I want for Christmas is you.”