

Midnight Mass, 24 December 2023

Isaiah 62:6-12

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas is all about choices – where are we going to spend it, what are we going to eat and drink, who are we going to send Christmas cards to, what presents shall we buy. No wonder by the time we get to Christmas, we're exhausted and frazzled, rather than joyful and triumphant.

But as Christians we believe that there are more important choices to be made at Christmas.

To start with, God made three important specific choices given he could have arrived among us in any way he chose. First, he chose to come and live among us in the shape and form of Jesus, and secondly, and perhaps the riskiest choice of all, to come as a vulnerable baby, at a time when infant mortality was horribly high so all manner of things could have gone wrong, Thirdly, he chose to be born where he was needed most.

Born among the have-nots, the downtrodden, the isolated, the forgotten.

And that surely gives us hope. Christian hope is not about simple optimism built on foundations of sand, but rather a certainty that the world can be made a better place and that in God's time He will restore all things.

Mary of course didn't choose to be in Bethlehem that night more than 2,000 years ago, she would no doubt have preferred to be in Nazareth with her family around her.

Joseph didn't have a choice about the fact that his fiancée's baby wasn't his. Neither Joseph nor Mary had a choice about where Jesus ended up being born. They had to be in Bethlehem because of the Roman census, and short of being born in a ditch the stable was the about only place available given all the guest rooms in Bethlehem were not surprisingly full.

The shepherds almost certainly wouldn't have chosen to be shepherds, given it was regarded as one of the lowest jobs around. They were so unimportant they wouldn't even have had to fill in the census form. So unimportant in

worldly terms, but clearly not in God's eyes, otherwise why would Jesus have chosen to identify himself as the Good Shepherd.

No wonder Luke chooses the shepherds to be the first recipients of the good news of Jesus' birth to emphasise the point that the coming of God's kingdom was good news for everyone, regardless of their social status.

I'm sure the shepherds wouldn't have chosen to be on the night shift either, but it was a question of economic survival for them.

And in our own lives there are times when we don't have choices. We don't have a choice when we are diagnosed with something that can't be cured.

For almost all of us we don't feel we have a choice but to rally round as best we can when something like that affects someone in our family. We certainly don't have a choice when someone very close to us dies.

But Christmas is different. Christmas is about God giving us a choice. And he says I'm here, do you want me? Will you accept this vulnerable new-born baby as your Saviour? Do you want to come into the light or stay in the darkness?

It's up to you. I'm not forcing you to do anything. We're free to make our choice.

Mary had made her choice nine months earlier when she said Yes to God.

Joseph too had said Yes to God when he was minded to, but chose not to, push Mary out of his life. He chose to be with her at the birth.

The shepherds said yes to going to investigate what the angels had told them, no doubt out of curiosity, but they nevertheless they still chose to go. The arrival of the shepherds is a pivotal point in the whole story. After all, Mary had been visited by the Angel Gabriel, but how was she to know that Jesus really was the Good News, the Messiah?

The arrival of the shepherds with their story of how the angels had visited them must have been confirmation to Mary that she hadn't been imagining things. Good news can turn up in the most unexpected places and we shouldn't dismiss it because of that.

In all three instances of being faced with a choice, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds had all been told not to be afraid to make the choice God was asking them to make.

In fact, the Bible is littered with examples of people being told not to be afraid, because saying yes to God can be scary, very scary. But the assurance to them that they did not need to be afraid applies to us too.

We may not have been feeling unalloyed joy when we arrived here this evening, but I think we can be sure that, among many different emotions, Mary, like most mothers, would have been joyful after successfully giving birth.

And that emotion of joy is what God is inviting us into when we say yes to him. After all, God took joy in sending His Son here on earth, because he knew that was the way to reconcile us to Him and that is what he has always wanted above anything else.

Now it is fair to say that all of us want to experience joy in our lives. But wanting to and actually doing so are two different things. We are weighed down by the cares of daily life, the injustices we see around us, and many other things that drive joy out of the window.

What is joy? Well it may be difficult to define, but when you meet a joyful person you know it even if you can't quite put your finger on what it is. The best acronym I can offer you is this, Jesus – Oh Yes.

The words of O Come all Ye Faithful are pretty familiar to most of us, but let's think for a moment about the refrain. O Come Let Us Adore Him.

Biblical adoration is about becoming lost in awe and wonder at the goodness and love of God. That's what happened to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds.

But how often do we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by God's goodness to us to the point of adoration? Not very often I suspect. How often do we remember that God risked everything for us in Jesus' birth and his death – simply because he loves us so much.

That invites a response from us, a willingness to take a risk ourselves, to look with adoration at the infant Christ and respond Jesus Oh Yes