

Light and hope

We are now almost at the end of 2023, and I wonder what your lasting impression of it is?

They say that no news is good news, and this year, it seems that we've had an awful lot of news... and most of it has been bad news.

Across the globe, ancient conflicts still rage and new ones have begun. Economically, it seems things are worse than they were a year ago. These – it seems - are dark times.

We can all relate to this idea of things being dark, can't we? We've all been scared of the dark at some time in our lives. We know the feelings of uncertainty, fear, despair and hopelessness that the darkness conveys.

We look at recent events and get the feeling that things have never been so bad before... but then things have been bad before. Things have looked without hope before. Remember three years ago when Covid effectively cancelled Christmas for many people, or four years to the bushfire crisis. Worldwide we can go back to the events of September 2001, or the cold war, the Second World War, the Great Depression, the First World War and on it goes. Each generation has been confronted by horrors, often several times over.

And while some things do change over time, diseases eradicated or controlled, wars won or lost, borders resolved, peace made... but many things haven't changed. Differences aren't always resolved, and time has not healed all wounds, some conflicts rage, some simmer, some flare up from time to time.

And at a personal level, as we get older, there's more to worry about, more people to miss. We, so often in our own lives, are in dark places.

Christmas day is up there with Easter Sunday as the most joyous Christian celebrations, but the day after – as you might remember from the song, Good King Wenceslas, is the feast of Stephen – when we remember the first Christian Martyr. And the 28th of December, is traditionally Holy Innocents Day, when we remember that King Herod ordered the death of all boy children in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus. And of course, Christmas is the start of the journey that would lead Jesus to his death on the cross at Calvary...

But the message of Christmas is hope for people who are in dark places. We heard the prophecy of Isaiah, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2a)

Sometimes it's easy to see the light, and sometimes it's hard. It may be a greater leap to the light for people in those darkest of places, but the wonderful thing about the light that Christ brings, as we will hear shortly in the reading from John's gospel, is that the darkness has not overcome it.

If God seems far away, too far for you to reach; don't despair - we don't have to try and find our way to God, because in that first Christmas, God reached out to us. To all of us.

Jesus says later in John's gospel that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that whomsoever believes in him shall not die, but have eternal life.

God gave his son to us not to destroy us or punish us for our wrongdoings, but to reach out to us, to shine his light into our darkness, to share his love with us.

As we'll hear in our final reading this morning, John's gospel refers to Jesus as the source of life, and tells us that his life brought light to people...

Wherever you might be this Christmas, whether you are overjoyed by the festive season, or saddened by the memories of Christmas' past, or despairing for the future, be assured that the light of Jesus shines for you.

At Christmas we remember the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and we see nativity scenes showing the holy family, the shepherds and the wise men bathing in the glow of heavenly light... though the reality of a baby born in a stable in first century Judea might not have been quite so idyllic. And of course, things soon darkened for Jesus: Herod set out to kill him and the family fled to Egypt. And when Jesus returned and began his ministry, he was rejected by his own people. And we know from the Easter story, that Jesus was conspired against, betrayed, rejected, denied, humiliated, beaten and crucified. Jesus has been to the dark places.

But the darkness couldn't overcome him. And he rose again.

And the light of Jesus still shines for us in the dark places of our lives. We only have to turn to him in response.

The sad fact is that not everyone has recognised Jesus, and for two thousand years many have chosen to turn away from the peace he came to bring: As John's gospel tells us: He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him. Some, however, did receive him and believed in him; so he gave them the right to become God's children.

The offer, to become one of God's children is still there for each of us. To put our trust in him and become God's children. No matter where we are. No matter what our background. No matter if we have rejected that offer before, or have drifted away...

The essence of the Christmas story is this: in Jesus, the word became flesh, and shone a light into a dark world. A light that cannot be overcome, and that still shines for each one of us. Today, this Christmas, and always.

Amen.