

O night divine.

It's Christmas Eve. The shops are closed. Children across the world are sleeping soundly. All the preparations have been made. Because tomorrow, we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Tomorrow? Because we heard in our fourth reading tonight that, "...there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

So maybe it should be tonight that we celebrate Jesus' birth?

Well, they're both right, because in the Jewish tradition, the day ends at sunset. So what we know of as Christmas Eve *night*, and Christmas Day *day*, can be thought of, together, as the day of Christmas.

The carol we've just heard began "O holy night! The stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear Saviour's birth." And that sets the scene – it's how that night in Bethlehem has been depicted time and time again over the years. It is a special night. It is a clear night – and therefore it's a cold night too – you can imagine the shepherds out watching their sheep, shivering against the cold, and Mary and Joseph huddling around their newborn child who is wrapped in cloths and laying in the manger.

And then from that scene, the picture moves out "Long lay the world in sin and error pining". It tells us what's wrong with the world – what was wrong all those years ago, and what is wrong today... we all do the wrong thing, we all think the wrong things too. We look around and we see the effect of that sin and error everywhere – from the great conflicts of the world, to exploitation and greed, to the minor – but no less painful – conflicts of our own lives.

But all people – lying in sin and error – desire something more. They're pining for something more, as the carol says. We might all yearn to leave sin and error behind, but we can't do that ourselves.

God's people had long awaited a messiah, the one who would save them, and we've heard prophecies from the old testament about that messiah:

From Isaiah "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

From Micah "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel"

And another from Isaiah "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him."

Then, in the darkness of that one night, that night divine, 2,000 odd years ago in Bethlehem, "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them [...]the angel said to them, "[...] I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

This was the solution for the problems of the world – what would deliver what everyone in the world is pining for.

As the carol tells us, “’Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth.” All of those people living in sin and error – all of us people – felt their worth. Do you feel your worth tonight? We often say in church that we are unworthy... and we all do fall short of the glory of God... but we all have worth. Unworthy does not mean worthless.

We can see our worth by looking at how much God has paid for us – he gave us his son – Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, who was born in humble circumstances in Bethlehem – and that was just the first part of what God paid for us – because Jesus would ultimately shed his blood for us and die for us on the cross at Calvary.

We are worth so much to God, that God gave up his only son for us.

And then, on this night all those years ago, as Luke’s gospel told us “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”

This was not a normal occurrence on the hills outside Bethlehem. This was something that hadn’t happened before, and hasn’t happened since. This was the night that everything changed. The night divine.

As the writer of O Holy Night, Placide Cappeau, put it, “A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.”

Or as we heard in our first reading tonight “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” (Isaiah 9:2)

So, we have this image of Jesus’ birth bringing the transition from night to morning – from darkness into light.

We’ve all been in darkness, we’ve been wallowing in sin and error... how should we respond to this?

Well, there can really be only one response:

Fall on your knees. Hear the angel voices.

Hear the good news. Take it into your heart. And respond to it. We are not worthless, but we are unworthy of this gift that God has chosen to give to us. We should be in awe of what God has done, and we humble ourselves – fall on our knees – in response.

And if we read on from our reading from Luke’s gospel, we find that the shepherds, after they found Mary, Joseph and Jesus, went and spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child (2:17) and they glorified and praised God for what they had heard and seen (2:20)

This was the night – the night divine – when Jesus, the Christ, the messiah was born. The night that, in Jesus, God became one of us. Not because of anything we’d done, but because of his great love for us.

Amen