

St Peter's Limpsfield: Sermons for Christmas 2018

MIDNIGHT MASS 2018

John 1:1-14

May I speak in the name of God, with us and among us.

I heard last week up the High Street, near the Grimsby fish man, that I'm leaving. I did ask the senior member of our community who told me whether he was getting mixed up with the farewells to Andrew happening in Oxted and Tandridge tomorrow, but he said he wasn't.

I do find many blessings here in Limpsfield, but sometimes find the grapevine well wide of the mark. It's not true. I'm not leaving. Though I did go to Chelmsford last month for a couple of nights to see some of my friends who are priests in other places. I was the only one who brought a car, and after a drive full of traffic I made my way to Chelmsford station to pick them up. The road layout was awkward, certainly for a visitor in a new place, in the darkness.

A couple of weeks later, I got a letter from Essex County Council informing me of a bus lane contravention. I hate bus lanes. I can usually manage the basic keeping out, but as soon as it gets complicated, I might as well get my wallet straight out. The ones I hate most are those in Addiscombe where I donated to Croydon Council more than once, even though surely the very sensible priority on the roads around there is to avoid driving into a tram rather than into a bus lane.

Essex County Council helpfully supplied with me with a couple of photos to help me to decide quickly to pay the £30 penalty charge instead of the full £60. The close-up was very striking: complete darkness, save for a white number plate - yes it was mine - and two headlights emerging strangely. If you're having trouble visualising this, remember the posters for the musical 'Cats', with the two cat's eyes set in the darkness, and imagine it without any words.

'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' (John 1:5)

Other translations of this most luminous gospel verse say: *the darkness did not - comprehend it or perceive it, apprehend it, suppress it or overpower it, understand it or extinguish it, grasp it, or put it out.*

I have trouble comprehending bus lane cameras. But of course there's something much bigger here. And we only glimpse a little bit of it. And as Christians - again I'm tempted to say, of course, but I think this is quite widely misunderstood - we still know at least as much about the darkness as the light.

Sometimes Christians in their anxiety to share the faith make wild and ridiculous statements. Here are a couple. One heard recently in leading prayers in a church near here:

'Please help us to make God absolutely clear.'

And the other found in a book of Prayers for Children:

'As you get to know him, your problems will end.'

Certainly the Church needs to teach the faith well, and to encourage people to pray. But was anyone ever absolutely clear about God? Only maniacs and nutters! If we had absolute clarity we wouldn't need faith, would we? Even Jesus cried out in incomprehension from the darkness of the cross. And I expect every mature Christian could testify that growing in relationship with God does not always dispel our problems, though it helps us to see them in a different light.

I hope that here we share and encourage instead something deeper, more mysterious, simpler, truer to our real human experiences; that the church creates a space in which we can remember who and whose we are, and be that more fully in our whole lives. This is not a refuge from reality, but a growing into it.

For *'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.'* And *'the Word became flesh' - is becoming flesh again - and lives among us, and we are seeing his glory...full of grace and truth.'*

In one ugly but striking modern translation: 'Christ shares your postcode.' You are deeply and profoundly known and loved. Even when you make a mess of everyday stuff like bus lanes, or anything else.

So, Happy Christmas. And when we've finished celebrating, what might that mean for us in the coming year? As in Madeleine L'Engle's poem, *First Coming*:

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace
He came when the Heavens were unsteady
and prisoners cried out for release.*

*He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait
till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
He came, and his Light would not go out.*

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

May we all know that rejoicing, tonight and in the
year to come. Amen.

James Percival
Team Rector of Limpsfield & Tatsfield

CHRISTMAS MORNING 2018:

John 1:1-14

May I speak in the name of God, with us and among us.

'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth.' (John 1:14).

And we celebrate this morning, Jesus *becoming* flesh and *living* among us, and we *are* seeing his glory again.

In the midst of the children's full immersion in the present and presents of today - a holy clue there - it's a moment when we might also reflect on the past year.

In my family, though we still remember her stealing crisps on her first Christmas Day many years ago, we had to let Annie, our beloved big dog, go in May. Then, after a short sharp campaign by my wife and daughter, Polly Wolly Doodle came to be with us at the end of July.

It is fair to say that her puppy training so far has been - variable :-). But she was doing well in a class a couple of weeks ago, which Kathryn and I unusually managed to go to together. The teacher was showing us how to help the puppies - six in all - to sit and wait and focus while we did silly and distracting things like standing on one leg or jumping in the air.

I was quite hopeful when it came to my turn. I prepared the treats in my open hand, got Polly to sit and wait, jumped in the air and the treats jumped out of my hand, and

went all over the floor! Which rather broke Polly's concentration.

And I said a rude word - not the worst, but still - and it echoed around in one of those moments of quiet, so the whole group heard.

Our teacher said, "James, this is a children's classroom during the day!" - as indeed that village hall is - and then Kathryn said: "and he's a vicar!" (Thanks very much).

And the teacher was amazed and said:
"Really? You're a vicar?!"
That has restored my faith."

Amazing.

Sometimes when we think we've messed things up, they can surprisingly be a blessing to others. Because we only see a little bit of the whole picture. We often don't get it, or get it wrong. But the light keeps coming.

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the darkness did not -

*comprehend it or perceive it,
apprehend it,
suppress it or overpower it,
understand it or extinguish it,
grasp it, or put it out.*

Christmas depends not on our goodness but on God's grace, and God can and does use us just as we are. God makes us holy, not we ourselves.

This is God's present to us in Jesus. Non-negotiable. You are deeply and profoundly known and loved, even though you may not always feel it. And even when you make a mess of everyday stuff like puppy training, good behaviour, or anything else. These are the tidings of comfort and joy for us all.

As in one ugly but striking modern translation: 'Christ shares your postcode.' And the Spirit gives us grace to carry the good news.

It's then just a question of how we each choose to respond to that cosmic, huge, yet intimate, close, present.

And when we've finished celebrating, what might that mean for us in the coming year?

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for different bible translations:

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/john/1-5-compare.html>