

## **“For the grace of God has dawned upon the earth”**

It is wonderful to be here this evening, after not only our lost Christmas last year but with the uncertainty of the last few days it's a huge relief.

However, preaching at this service does come with a few imperatives, the most important of which is “be brief” but with few guidelines on how to do that with a subject that deserves a lot of attention. At the very moment when we celebrate the incarnation – God becoming man, a moment ripe for exploring the fullness of incarnational theology; we have little time to linger and to attempt to reach into the corners of our souls in a way that the incarnation suggests that we should but which if I attempted to do that now, you may well not thank me for!

Nevertheless, in a few chosen words, I will attempt to whet your appetites for more and leave your minds to ponder on this unique and mind-blowing event.

We may be very familiar with our gospel reading from Luke 2 but probably less so with our reading from Paul's letter to his companion and disciple Titus. For Saint Augustine, the highlight in this Christmas Day feast is described as: “the ears of the heart”. Paul describes it to Titus as that glorious moment when “the grace of God dawned upon the earth”, or as it says in our translation: “for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all”.

It is quite literally an epiphany moment. The light is dawning, the dayspring or new era just arisen in the east and in a harmony of body and soul, comes a dawn in our hearts to match the dawn of the physical day.

From Isaiah we have heard the prophet's proclamation that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Once, when God walked with his people (the Israelites coming out of Egypt) they had a pillar of fire by night to light their way. It is a way of telling us that “walking in darkness” is a state of separation from God which many of us, Christians or not, have experience of.

At Christmas, the veil between people of faith and those outside of it is at its most translucent. There is something about this light in the darkness – a bright beacon at a time when natural light is at its scarcest. And somehow it draws people in, regardless of what they may think about the identity of that baby.

Without being clear what God's grace is, or, for that matter, what a manifestation is, people feel a powerful and deep pull.

But what is this “manifestation of the grace of God”? Well, to return to the simplicity of the Christmas story, it is exactly what Luke makes plain in his gospel. A baby wrapped up warm and sleeping is a familiar image that we can all understand. The crib in the church reinforces that image. Before our mind's eye lies the sleeping infant. We tread carefully to avoid waking him, watch him in all his vulnerability and need. And with perfect clarity, the very grace of God dawns once more in our hearts and in our world. And we tread lighter in the hope that the message heralds – God manifest in our midst, God taking on human form, God living as one of us, God suffering as one of us, God dying as we will do but, and this is the important bit, breaking down the barriers to death through his resurrection, rising again to new life and lighting our way. As St John wrote in his Gospel - “the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1.14).

The astonishing fact is that the grace of God has appeared in human form and the clear expectation is that Christ will come again. We have to pray that the message that Christ walked on stage at a precise moment in historical time and showed us the best that

humanity can ever be will never fail to thrill us. Many of us will remain unmoved by this glorious truth, travelling on, with little long-term interest; but as Dorothy Sayers wrote “if this is dull then what in heaven’s name is worthy to be called exciting?”

The grace and truth of God has appeared and nothing will ever be the same again!

Happy Christmas and Amen.