

# Christmas midnight 2020

Gospel: Luke 2:1–14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

Bishop Paul says:

This has been an extraordinary year, marked with darkness, confusion and tragedy as well as with goodness, care and life. But in some ways this extraordinary year can help us to see the Christmas story more clearly. Over and over again since March we have had to adapt ourselves to Government restrictions and to limit our own freedom – in my judgement for very good reasons – so that when we come to this story, and read that everyone had to go to their own towns to be registered, we have perhaps a slightly clearer sense of how they felt. A couple, the woman pregnant and therefore vulnerable, having nonetheless to fit with the demands of the state; in this case the demand to travel far in order to give their names in the census – a couple incidentally carrying an extraordinary hope along with the baby, indeed in the baby.

And a group of people in a rough profession, shepherds on the edge of society, living precariously for the sake of their flocks, connecting to their astonishment with the messengers of God, and being welcomed into that same hope and pointed towards that same baby.

Christmas cards and works of art can often give us the wrong idea of the Christ child. Most often there's a bonny bouncing baby on Mary's lap, at least nine months old, usually pretty well-fed, even plump. But we all know that at the beginning of life, a baby doesn't look like that. My youngest grandchild, Ellie, was born just after Christmas two years ago. I saw her soon after, just as I saw each one of my own children moments after they were born. Tiny scraps of humanity, wrinkled and frail, knowing nothing except to cling and to cry and to feed and to fill her nappy. Entirely vulnerable and utterly helpless. That's how we all began, and it is how Jesus began, as the Bible tells us. And now whenever I think of the Christ-child at Christmas it is of Ellie that I think first, and through the eyes that saw Ellie, I see Jesus.

So the story is of an extraordinary secret hope, revealed to a young woman and her bewildered partner, shared with this group of rough people on the edge of things, manifest in utter helplessness.

Christians believe that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Not some sort of half-divine superman who never had a problem, As it says in Hebrews 4, "...we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."

If this is so, then as the writer to Hebrews goes on to say, we can "...approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

The story of the surprising hope, the utterly helpless baby who saves us all, is the story of Christmas. As we feel our way through the darkness and the confusion of the Coronavirus, my prayer is that all of us in the Diocese – in every parish and school and fresh expression and Chaplaincy – will share that secret and surprising hope.

I hope that we will speak of God's love in Jesus to our neighbours, in the spirit of our Rule of Life that says we are sent to tell. I hope that we will speak of it through our actions as we feed the hungry, the sisters and brothers of the utterly helpless baby, in the spirit of our Rule of Life that says we are sent to serve. I hope that we will offer our lives and our resources to the helpless, building kindness and care for the common good, in the spirit of our Rule of Life that says we are sent to give.

And I hope that in this time of isolation and stress we will offer the needs of the world to the One who in every respect has been tested as we are, in the spirit of our Rule of Life that says we are called to pray. I hope that we will receive more and more deeply this Christmas time the truth of the story of the incarnation as we see it in the Bible, the truth of the word made flesh, the infinite God in the face of the utterly vulnerable baby, in the spirit of our Rule of Life that says we are called to read. I hope that we will continue to connect with one another and to understand more and more about our faith and the life it gives to the world, in the spirit of our Rule of Life that says we are called to learn.

We are called to pray, read and learn, as we are sent to tell, service and give. And we're called and sent to do all this, together, as people of the Diocese of Liverpool.

So all this I hope for you and your community, and in a nutshell it's my hope that the message of Christmas will strengthen you, and give you joy and hope for 2021. That you for being part of our Diocese of Liverpool. Be sure of my prayers for you in all you do. And – in your own life and in your own way, in the midst of whatever struggle and sadness you may feel, as the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it – happy Christmas!

+Paul