

Waking up on Christmas morning has a magical feel, especially if there are small children in the house. True, it can be tiring, if like me, you didn't get to bed until nearly two and had to be up at six, but it is a special day, a wonderful day. The house is unusually tidy, the tree lights are on, the cards are up, the hall is decked with holly, and soon the smell of turkey will be pervading the house.

I can still remember the very first Christmas card I bought to give to my parents. I went to Woolworths, where they sold individual cards and chose the one I thought was the prettiest. It had a picture of a deer in the snow and the whole card was covered in glistening white crystals to look like sparkling snow. It captured for me that essence of the magical.

Now, I tend not to buy cards covered in glitter, and Christmas has a very different feel as an adult than as a child – no less special, but quite different. Despite the fact that it always seems to arrive before I am quite ready, it feels more significant, more extraordinary.

We heard this morning that great reading from the prophet Isaiah: 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.' We can imagine the light pouring down from heaven, perhaps as it did when the angels appeared to the shepherds. Yet this morning, there will be people all over the world who are living in a land of deep darkness.

There will be the child who wakes despite everything optimistic for a Christmas stocking, only to be disappointed again, listening in fear to hear whether his mother's boyfriend is around. His bruises tell of the darkness in his life. There is the child in the refugee camp near the borders of Syria, cold and hungry. There is the child who has learnt to chant messages of hate in Egypt. What would it mean if the light were to shine on them, into those dark places?

We are tempted to think that it might mean no more violence, no more fear, no more poverty. We would like to think that. But that's the stuff of fairy tales, of sprinkling magical fairy dust and making it all better. Life isn't like that.

The light that shines in the dark places shows up the evil and gives strength for those with the will to fight it. So the mother of the beaten child, who has cried and pleaded, when the light shines will take courage, and leave, even if it means living in a refuge. She will protect her child. In the refugee camps, when the light shines, people will care for each other and share the little they have. In Egypt, the parents of the child will see the destructive power of hatred and teach their child a gentler way. The light is the light of righteousness. It is the light of the cross, the way of truth, the way of love, the

way of suffering. It is the light that gives courage to do the right thing.

When we are children we can mix up fairy tales and truth, but now we are adults, we need to know the difference between truth and fiction, between life and make believe. The light of truth is a stern light, a challenging light. It won't do all the work for us, but it will show us the way and give us the courage to follow the path .

We keep the fairy tale magic at our peril. The crib scene with the fluffy lambs and gruff shepherds do not show the mud, do not show the terror of the shepherds when they heard the angels, do not give any indication of the flight into Egypt that this new family had to endure. This is a grown up story, and it is our story.

We read about the dark places of the world, and we know that there are problems even closer to home – people in Wimbledon dependent upon the Food Bank, people living rough, people facing the bailiffs because they are in debt. No-one is going to sprinkle fairy dust on them and make it better. But the light can shine. And if people cannot see this light and gain strength from it, then it is up to us to take the light into the dark places. We can provide food for the food bank, cook meals for Faith in Action, volunteer at the night shelter. For those situations further afield, we can campaign against torture, refuse to support firms which harm the environment.

Christmas is about receiving the light of Christ, becoming aware that God loves you and me and each and every person so much that he went to the most extreme lengths to teach us how to love each other, how to make this world like his Kingdom, how to make it just, fair, caring.

This way is the way of the cross, the way of suffering, of putting each other first before ourselves.

It means that when the darkness enters our own being, when we are tempted to despair, or to anger, or to self pity, we let that light shine, the light that gives us strength, determination, courage to make a difference, to be a force for good not ill.

So, when you go home, look at the house all decorated for Christmas and enjoy it, celebrate over lunch, look at each person around the table and give thanks for them. And tomorrow, allow that love to reach out. For together we can take the light everywhere until there are no more dark places, for as in the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore.'