

Each morning begins in the same way, with a gradual awareness of being awake. It may be the radio playing, or the baby crying, or the ache in your shoulder, or the sun coming through the curtains, but gladly or reluctantly you are brought back to the physical world of sound, and feelings, and sights.

Some mornings are different, because we, uniquely, are able to anticipate, to know what is in store for us. On that day when we have an interview, or the funeral of someone we love, or maybe our wedding day, the moment of waking may be the same, but instantly thereafter, the morning is quite different. And so it is today. It is Christmas Day, different from every other day of the year. In the photographs it is hard to tell one Christmas Day from another: there is the photo of the turkey, grandpa wearing his paper hat, someone falling asleep after lunch, the tree, the tree again looking more lopsided. But this Christmas is unique. This is a special day. Special because today we become aware that even the mundane, even the most ordinary of things has sparkle, light, something of wonder about it.

We start with a story, a story that's known by everyone here. A young girl expecting a baby, forced to travel because of some bureaucratic idiocy, and finding nowhere to stay. It is not an unusual story. There are many such girls fleeing Syria and ending up in refugee camps, others kept waiting at checkpoints in Israel/Palestine so that they cannot reach hospital – babies are being born the world over in unhygienic and unsuitable places. It is, sadly, ordinary; it is an ugly feature of our civilisation that people fail to get the help they need when they need it. But this story is different.

In this story, there is a group of people who have been awake all night, watching and waiting, and they see something totally extraordinary. Shepherds, chatting around the fire, doing what they do every evening, alert for any mountain lion or other danger, see the sky transformed by light. They hear voices, music. They are suddenly connected with something quite outside of their experience, something wonderful and beautiful and terrifying. And life-changing.

Every night they guard the sheep. Every night they make the same jokes, grumble about the same things. But this night, they leave their sheep and go off to find the child, the Messiah of which the angels spoke. A long enough walk in the dark, but the excitement, the adrenaline rush caused by what they had seen and heard keeps them going. A Messiah!

What they find is a baby. An ordinary looking baby. Not even a proper cot or bedding. A tired mother, an anxious father, an indifferent worn out donkey.

This is what the people staying at the Inn see too. Nothing special.

But the shepherds are not dismayed. They recount their experience and go home praising God.

Their eyes had been opened. They didn't just see an ordinary baby, they saw the Messiah. They didn't just see an ordinary young mother, they saw God's servant. They didn't just see a dirty stable, they saw the whole world held in heaven. The ordinary, the mundane, the ugly, all had been transformed, lit up by heaven's light, so that the shining threads of God's work could be seen running through all things, all creation.

This story, this well-known story, is about God's light, the light of Christ coming into the world to reveal to us what is already here.

And that is what today is about and why today is so special.

Today, as we recount the story, we are reminded that this whole world is full of God's promise, of his love. It is infused with heaven. Most of the time we are so preoccupied with the little worlds of our own construction that we don't notice. But when our eyes are opened, it looks different. And because we, uniquely, are able to anticipate, we become aware that there is more to come, there is something even greater, that one day, we won't have glimpses of God's kingdom, but will be surrounded by it.

We are here, this Christmas Day, in this church, whose very building reflects the work and worship of the Victorians, and before them the Georgians, and others from way back. The very stones speak of the faith of those who worshipped here before us. And those people had the same worries as us, the same doubts. There were those whose children were in trouble, those whose marriages were unhappy, those who were in debt, those who were grieving, those who were angry and wanting revenge. But this building reminded them as it reminds us, we have a story. Our lives can sometimes seem hard, exhausting, or just plain dull; but look again. Look more closely. Around us, within us, there is God's kingdom, his love. When we let the light of Christ shine, we will see it clearly.

On this special day, as on all days, all are welcome at this altar. When you come to receive the gift of bread and wine or God's blessing, pray that the light of Christ will shine in you and through you, that each one of us may see this world in all its beauty and wonder, that we may encounter that generous love which brings hope and peace even in the midst of chaos. That in this blaze of light, we may see what is really around us.

May you, and all those that you love, have a very special Christmas. Amen.