

Readings for Christmas

25th December 2022

First Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For 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 onward and forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Second Reading: Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope

and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Gospel: St Luke 2:1-20

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 in the inn.

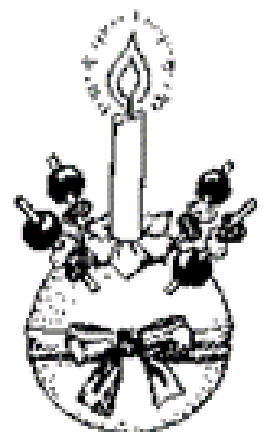
In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of 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,^[c] praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

A Reflection for Christmas

Yesterday, I finally got to make Christingles with some youngsters and assisting adults – a case of third time lucky since coming to the North West Charge, since Covid restrictions and scares have prevented this the last two years. The making of Christingles is a relatively new Christmas tradition – I certainly didn't come across it when I was a child – but it is one that I have come to love.

Christingles originated in the Moravian Church in Germany. It is said that they were introduced by a man named John de Watteville in 1747 as an attempt to get children to think about Jesus. Originally it was simply a candle with a red ribbon around it but was developed over the years. The idea was popularised in the UK by John Pensom, a fundraiser for The Children's Society, who first introduced Christingle services in Lincoln in 1968. In 1970, just twenty Christingle services were held in the UK. By 2018, more than six thousand such services were held for The Children's Society alone.



One of the reasons I particularly like it is that its symbolism encapsulates the significance of the birth of Christ for the world. The orange represents the world, and the candle reminds us of Jesus, the Light of the World. The red ribbon going right around the 'world' symbolises Jesus's blood, a reminder that he died for all people. The four cocktail sticks can be understood as the four seasons and also as the four cardinal points, so pointing to all parts of the world. And the sweets and dried fruit remind us of God's gifts to the world, including the earth's material resources such as food and fuel, but also those intangible gifts such as love, kindness and generosity; gifts that should be shared with the whole world.

According to some sources, the word 'Christingle' means 'Christ's Light', so it is particularly appropriate that we make them at Christmas, when we celebrate that Light coming into the world.

Light is a theme in the Christmas readings. Isaiah's prophecy opens with some familiar words: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined', and he goes on to make the connection between this light and the joy that will surround the people. Luke tells us that while the shepherds were having a quiet night on the hillside with their sheep, 'An angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them'. The letter to Titus speaks of waiting for the hope and the manifestation of the glory of God, a glory that we know from Luke will shine.

The Prologue to St John's Gospel, often read at Christmas, tells us of the light coming into the world and includes some other familiar words: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

Pope Francis, writing in 2014 said: 'This is how the liturgy of this holy Christmas night presents to us the birth of the Saviour: as the light which pierces and dispels the deepest darkness. ... Through the course of history, the light that shatters the darkness reveals to us that God ... is stronger than darkness and corruption. This is the message of Christmas night.'

As John's Gospel tells us, God sent his Son as the Light of the World because he loves us. He says: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16). Just as, if we love someone, we want to be close to them, so God also wants to be close to us. As the Christingle reminds us, Jesus the Light of the World came as our Saviour and as a model of how to live well in the world with one another and all God's creation, and he invites us to draw close to him, to allow his light and love to fill us, and to love him in return and follow his example. We have to

choose how we respond.

Pope Francis, in the piece I quoted from above, continued: 'People who were unassuming, people open to receiving the gift of God, were the ones who saw the light.' The shepherds, very ordinary, unassuming people, responded by going to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus, by drawing close to him, and then returned glorifying God. Their response was one small part in spreading the good news of Jesus' birth.

A friend was making Christingles with a group of schoolchildren recently and asked them what they knew about the world. One said 'stuff happens'. 'Stuff' does happen in the world and, the way our news media seems to work, we often seem to hear more about the bad 'stuff' than the good; more about the darkness than the light. But good 'stuff' happens too, often less noticed, certainly less reported, but it happens nevertheless. These are moments of light that break through the darkness.

If we light one candle, one Christingle say, and take it into a completely dark room, we know that the light will break the darkness – but one candle in a dark room will still be quite gloomy. Of course, if lots of us were to do that, it would be much brighter. So, each of us has our own small part to play in spreading the light and helping to dispel the darkness. Of course, we can't control everything that happens either in our own lives or in the world, but each time we follow Jesus' example, with each good deed, each kind word, each generous gesture, we contribute to the blaze of light that is the light of Christ shining in the darkness.

This Christmas, we are again invited to draw close to the manger, to see the infant Jesus, the Light of the World and to follow him.