



Archbishop Justin's sermon from the Christmas day Eucharist at Canterbury Cathedral:

Come Holy Spirit and light our hearts with the fire and the joy of your love. Amen.

I join the Dean in wishing you a very, very joyful and wonderful Christmas. It's so amazing to be together again after three years of considerable disruption and it's wonderful to see so many in the Cathedral this morning.

Yet today on this day of joy and celebration all around the world we are conscious of darkness. At the beginning of Advent, with a small group of colleagues, we stood in a churchyard in Bucha, in Ukraine, by a mass grave found after Bucha's liberation in the spring. On the way we'd paused at a ruined bridge, the only route out of the town for residents seeking to escape the occupation, lined with crosses, tied roughly to the wire that marked the planks you should tread on, lined with the crosses each showing someone who had died trying to escape through the broken spans of the bridge. Where then is the great light? Where is the triumph and the truth of the words from John's gospel, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

When we're honest, it seems to many of us that the darkness this year has often seemed to overcome. What of the evils that are being inflicted to this day on the suffering yet courageous people of Ukraine, as they continue to endure and resist Russia's unjust and brutal invasion of their country?

What of those in this country who will be cold and hungry today, as the cost of living crisis continues to cause such immense anxiety and hardship? I met many the day before yesterday in a food bank at All Saints Church, around the corner.

What of the women in Afghanistan, deprived of education and all human decency?

And even yesterday, Christmas Eve, a call came concerning South Sudan, threats of fresh instability, even war launched by some of its leaders, where millions already face famine. Where is their light?

The message of course in this world to those who have chosen to invade Ukraine, to those who rule South Sudan and other such suffering countries is first that the world does watch, does care and will hold rulers responsible for justice.

But astonishingly our commitment to justice springs from God's light in the darkness. This baby? Given in mercy-inspired-by-love, who is the true God who empties himself to become fully human.

Compare such a love to those rulers who grasp at power. Contrast the behaviour of her late Majesty, who in obedience to the Christ Child lived a life of service and put her interests after those of the people she served.

Whose name will be remembered? Who will be welcomed by God in heaven? In South Sudan let them make peace, as Pope Francis implored the rulers in 2018, kneeling at their feet during our joint retreat in the Vatican. In Ukraine let Russia withdraw. Let there be a ceasefire, as the whole world longs for.

But even where the world forgetfully turns a blind eye to injustice and suffering, pays no attention to a war, God is present through Jesus in the world. God does not give up on a darkness-loving world.

The song we sing, Oh Come Oh Come Emmanuel - the title Emmanuel, God with us - tells us that God sees and acts. Though rulers may, just possibly, escape human justice, they will never escape the judgement of God who especially loves the poor and afflicted. Let that be remembered by those in Russia and South Sudan and in the 50 other wars around the world that the UN records, (how many can we name in our own minds) who pursue war those rulers and loose all the forces of hell.

In this child Jesus, God Himself, God shows that he does not give up on us.

And that is truly why we are here. I hope and trust at the depths of our being. Yes, the music is wonderful, the choirs outstanding, the building is beautiful beyond description, the service is inspiring, the sermon. ... well, let's pass over that! Yet none of those are an end in themselves.

For we are here to meet Jesus. He is God's gift of life and light. And when lives and hearts are open to him, as the Carol "Oh Little Town" says,

Where misery cries out to Thee,
 Son of the Mother mild;
Where Charity stands watching
 And Faith holds wide the door,
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,
 And Christmas comes once more.

It's verse four in the traditional version.

In Jesus Christ, God reaches out to each one of us here; to you and to me. Reaches out those small hands of a little baby. God reaches out to those whose family have no resources around us in this country today, into the dark cells of prisons, into the struggles of hospital

wards, to those on small boats, to the despairing, and even to the condemned and wicked, and God says, "Take me into your heart and life, let me set you free from the darkness that surrounds and fills you, for I too have been there. And God says, 'In me there is forgiveness, hope, life and joy, whoever and wherever you are, whatever you have done.'"

And that is why, even in Bucha, among all the horror, the darkness does not overcome the light. There we met the local priest, who told me how they had disinterred the dead from the mass grave and buried them with dignity amidst the war. There in South Sudan are the church leaders who build communities of peace as they are harried, hunted and chased from one place to the other, as refugees.

The Bishop who is Secretary General of the Anglican Communion, Bishop Anthony Poggio, has in his life been a refugee three times, and yet the light of Christ shines from him.

And there are all those in this country who open their hearts and homes to those seeking asylum, love their neighbours far and wide, serve their communities. They serve in food banks. The youngest volunteer I met on Friday, just down the road at All Saints, was 10 years old. They crew lifeboats and Border Force patrols. They serve in hospital wards and hospices like The Pilgrims Hospice, where I saw them yesterday. In daily life the love of God pours from them.

All over this country, all over the world, there is a rebellion. There are echoes of the defiant joy-filled refrain of the angels, who sang and danced before the shepherds. Before the shepherds: people that society thought mattered the least. Acts of service in love are the weapons of this rebellion by those who have not given up on others - imitating the love of God who gives up on no one. They are rebels who choose light in the darkness and life in the face of death, and love amongst the indifferent, and in so doing, know it or not, dance and echo the voice of the angels.

Love is the opposite of turning away and giving up on each other. This is how God responds to the darkness. Through Jesus something new - unprecedented - is at work in creation. The unconquerable light

shines in the darkness, the angels sing, the Magi travel and even Herod cannot defeat a small child.

And through Jesus, God calls every person – all of us, all of you, and me - to be the bearer of an alternative possibility to the darkness. For Jesus Christ is the remedy for the sadness and suffering of the world.

We must not give up on each other, for God does not give up on us. God frees and forgives through this child. Forgiveness is difficult, it was made possible by God emptying himself, hanging on a cross. Forgiveness feels impossible but forgiveness is the indispensable foundation for a world that seeks hope and loves the light and desires kindness and mercy, and forgiveness is the testimony of the Christ Child.

Like the shepherds, we are invited to welcome Christ into our lives. The question to each of us, to every person here, is will you open your hearts and future to Him, consciously, deliberately, explicitly? For in doing so we each and all will find that His presence brings light and life and freedom to all our relationships. And we become the source of that light and life and freedom in the world. So let us go out from here, wherever we are, online or physically here, let us go out as those inspired like the shepherds, to 'glorify and praise God for all we have heard and seen.' Not just in silence of our inward living and our hearts but in the cries and shouts and dancing and songs of those who are transformed by the Christ Child.

Amen.