

Christmas Eve, 2011

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

This evening you and I have come here to St Leonard's to be with our family, friends and neighbours... to sing together some lovely Christmas carols, to hear again the familiar story of the birth of Jesus, and to make our own offering of love to the Christ child lying in a manger. Do you realize that we are among the more than 2 billion believers who will be celebrating Christmas all around the world this year?

Tonight, in our reading from Luke's gospel, we hear the shepherd's story. We hear that on that first Christmas night those shepherds are simply going about their business as usual. But, suddenly, they are confronted by a word from on high—like a bolt out of the blue! It's a complete surprise... The angel says: "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people... to you is born a saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord". And, that night, the shepherds are given a sign.

The sign they are given is the baby; that Jesus is in a manger is *part of* the sign. That Jesus is humble and lowly is *part of* the sign; but *he* is the sign—the sign that you and I have been saved from our sinfulness—the sign that god's presence is with us again.

Then angels sing to the shepherds of, "Peace on earth among those whom God favours"... and, for us, that means all people who have been created by God in God's image. That means—everybody.

How badly you and I need to hear this message of peace in our troubled world today! Why, only today in the paper, I read of suicide bombings in Damascus as part of the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, a country that appears to be on the brink of civil war. And what about the ongoing struggle between the Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land?

You and I certainly need this Christmas message of peace and good will towards all to bring hope to our troubled world, don't we?

And so I invite you to make room for the Christ child to be born anew in your heart. Christ our saviour is born, as a little child—born to bring us back into relationship with our God...a relationship that we have often turned away from in our sinfulness.

But now we know that we are saved; Jesus restores our relationship with God so that we can know and love God forever.

And, once we have the confidence of a loving relationship with God to count on, we can share this love with one another in the true spirit of Christmas. This very night. As Christina Rossetti wrote in her Christmas poem, we can ask ourselves,

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him: give him my heart, give my heart.¹*

May the peace and joy of Christmas be with you all this night and throughout the Christmas season. Amen.

¹ "In the Bleak Midwinter" by Christina Rossetti 1872