CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT – CATHEDRAL 2012

*And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window’s hue,
A Baby in an ox’s stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?*

The words of John Betjeman. He asks, ‘And is it true?’ Can it be that in this manger scene – in this pool of light shining on the poverty and simplicity which surround the birth of a baby – we see the whole of what is to be said about God and his relationship with the world.

In the Gospel reading, the same thing was expressed in the big picture – ‘In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.’ This is the Christmas story on a cosmic scale. Like children afraid of the dark, we may worry that the darkness will engulf us – the darkness of a world in which children are gunned down; poverty, the denial of human rights, hunger

It seems to me entirely reasonable to ask if there is hope for such a world. To which I think that the Christmas story replies by saying that there is a difference between wanting to turn off the dark and turning on the light. That sounds a bit childish – what I mean is that a God whose chosen way of working in his world is through the birth, life, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus – a God uses us through the action of his presence and his spirit in our lives – such a God will not at a stroke turn off the darkness of the world. But Christmas does turn on the light – the light which shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

But if you should ask, ‘What is God like?’ you will find that Christmas gives you an unexpected answer. It carries us back to the manger scene – back to Betjeman’s lines, ‘A baby in an ox’s stall – the maker of the stars and sea – Become a child on earth for me?’ Christmas tells us that this is what God is like – this pool of light in an obscure place at an obscure time – this innocent and helpless child who was the fulfilment of prophecy – this child who grew up to obey, suffer, sacrifice and die. This is all that can be said about God and how he works.

We wonder at that – grasp the edges of it in familiar carols; feel it in the flickering light in the all-embracing dark of our winter. And we ask what it means for us. And I think it means that it is the small stuff which matters – the points at which we turn on the light rather than allowing the dark to reign

When you decide to love those around you, that day is Christmas.

When you take the first step to be at peace with a loved one, that day is Christmas.

When you meet someone who asks for help and you respond whole-heartedly, that day is Christmas.

When you take time to talk to someone who is lonely and sad, that day is Christmas.

When you understand that resentment can be transformed by forgiveness, that day is Christmas.

When you learn that giving sets you free, that day is Christmas.

When you realize that love, service and authentic concern are the best gifts, that day is Christmas.

When you decide to live with joy and hope rather than surrender to fear and sadness, that day is Christmas.

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I believe that it is is – the most powerful statement about the nature of God – a statement which has the power to transform our lives and our darkened world.