Christmas Midnight Cathedral 2013

He came as a witness …

Christmas is many things. It’s the great family time, for those who aren’t stuck at an airport somewhere with their arrangements in ruins. It’s carols and children and nativity plays. But in the midst of the warmth, there is sharpness in today’s Christmas. The economic pages in the press report war of nerves between the shoppers and the retailers. This year it was the retailers who blinked first and began offering 30% discounts. In the midst of all the Christmas spending, the payday lenders are there, reminding us of the plight of the most economically vulnerable in our society – forced to borrow at ruinous interest rates. And of course war continues to take away life, dignity and well-being – in Syria, Sudan and the Middle East and in many other places.

It’s the best of human life and the worst. No doubt it has always been so and it was so in the time of Jesus

‘There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light so that all might believe through him.’

What was wonderful about John the Baptist is that his energy and the vehemence of his proclamation were not about himself. He pointed always to Jesus – always towards the one whom St John calls ‘the light’. He is pointing to the reality that God is pitching his tent as a person within our world and within our history.

The reality then is that we too are called also to testify to the light – to speak out in our times what Jesus represents in the world in which we live – what God has to say about the confusion and the cruelty of the world of our times.

I think that means above all two things.

The first is that, if we like John the Baptist, are here to point towards Jesus – then our lives are not primarily about ourselves. We are not the centre, the focus, the object, the tinsel and glitter of our lives. We are not the Strictly Come Dancing finalists in our own lives. We point away from ourselves to the heart of what life is about.

The second is that we need to think about what God understands and is concerned about. God loves us and hopes that we shall return his love to him in worship and service. You may be surprised to hear me say that God is not likely to be terribly interested in the business of religion with all its fussiness and tradition for its own sake. Think for a moment about what really challenges us in the depth of our being – suffering, sickness and pain, betrayal and denial particularly in our personal relationships, humiliation, loss and death. None of us is immune to those. We are profoundly challenged by them because they happen in our lives and, for the most part, we can’t do anything very much about them. They can’t be fixed by wanting to or by determination or by strength of character. They can only be transformed and redeemed by sacrifice, love, truth and generosity and by healing at the deepest level – and those are the things which we see embodied in Jesus Christ.

At its heart, Christmas is about God offering an answer to the pain of human life – of light shining in the darkness and the darkness not overcoming it - of John who came as a witness, of God’s creative and loving answer to all the pain and sadness which has ever been and will ever be. ‘The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth’ Jesus sings these words into our hearts so that we know who God is – knowing who God is we know who we are as well. And we sing them too.