

**SERMON 23.12.18**

**By Joy Dipple**

**Readings:- Micah 5:2-5a  
Luke 1:39-45**

This last Friday was the shortest day of the year. The nights are at their longest and yes it can be depressing. It is the reason why this afternoon we are having the 'longest night' service – aimed at those of us who struggle with the Festive Christmas celebrations, for whatever reason – whether it be bereavement, loneliness, or just feeling low at this time of the year.

When Rog and I returned from our holiday in October the clocks had to go back an hour the same weekend, so there was a sense of suddenly being thrust into the dark season of the year. I don't really like it to be honest and especially when I think of all that has to be done in the lead up to Christmas as well.

But on a spiritual level we enter the time of Advent when we should be preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ into the world, both as a memory of 2000 years ago, and also as a looking forward to his second coming.

Admittedly we often get taken up with the material preparations instead, but there are moments when the true meaning breaks through, perhaps when we for example attend the Christingle service on Advent Sunday. Attending Advent services at Church do remind us of what is really important about Christmas, but there are also special places on this earth where we can connect more easily with the spiritual realm – places such as Lindisfarne, Iona, or the routes taken by people on pilgrimage.

When I visited Walsingham I didn't like the high church rituals, but the village had a lovely spiritual atmosphere about it. Such places are known as areas where the 'air is thin' – meaning that the dividing line between heaven and earth hardly exists. The spiritual atmosphere is a result of the huge amount of prayer that has taken place in those areas. Prayer has that effect of reducing or eliminating the dividing line.

Sometimes when we pray we may feel that we are praying to a brick wall, but that isn't the reality. Honest prayer makes that wall more permeable and enables us to be more receptive to God's sustaining power.

Spiritual reality broke through into this world as Mary was chosen to become the mother of Jesus. She experienced moments of divine revelation which she would store up and ponder in her heart.

It can be helpful if we too take time to recollect the spiritual moments we experience in our own lives. The recall can enhance our own faith, particularly when we enter times of difficulty.

For Mary there would be further revelations but for now she had already experienced the encounter with the angel Gabriel who had told her about the part she would play in welcoming the Christ child into the world, as predicted in passages of scripture such as today's reading from the Prophet Micah.

Joseph too, would have a divine encounter as he is told in a dream to take Mary as his wife because the child was divinely conceived, and was to be named Jesus, which means saviour.

Now, in today's Gospel, Mary is greeted by her relative Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. It would be another example of divine intervention into this world, as Elizabeth was inspired by the Holy Spirit to give praise to Mary, the one who would be the mother of her Lord. It would also lead into Mary's own song of praise – the Magnificat.

We are nearly at the time when we celebrate the biggest breakthrough of the spiritual domain into our material world – the birth of Jesus Christ. In the darkness of this time of year the light of Christ still shines.

Our Christmas lights are a reminder of light in darkness. Quite a few of our neighbours, as well as ourselves, have put up outside lights and they really do look so attractive. I always enjoy travelling in the car at night time during the Christmas weeks and seeing what other lights people have erected around their homes. And metaphorically, in spiritual terms, the greater the darkness, the more brightly shines the light of Christ.

As Christmas comes and goes our memories of our own spiritual encounters can inspire us, and we can also look to other moments to treasure in the future.

Mary carried the Christ child, and we carry the Holy Spirit. He doesn't come and go, though we ourselves may not always notice his presence with us.

But he does point us towards those moments when the spiritual domain becomes more real to us.

Let us, like Mary, treasure those moments and use them to build up our own faith, so we too can reflect the light of Christ in the darkness of this world.

Have a good Christmas.