

**Quiet night out – Isaiah 52: 7-10 John 1: 1-14**  
**Midnight Communion 25/12/2023**

I wonder why each of us came here tonight? Why not simply have a quiet night in? Maybe it's simply a case of 'what we do at Christmas' – keeping our own tradition, at a time of year when tradition is so important. Maybe it's about fitting everything in when there are so many different demands on our time. Maybe it's about receiving the First Communion of Christmas, acknowledging this is what it is all about. Maybe it's about having a quiet night out instead of a quiet night in! – about space to think about the 'little town' where 'the everlasting light [shineth]' and how this 'silent night' is also indeed the 'holy night' when Christ the Saviour is born. Here, in church, we hope to enjoy the mystery of that stillness and holiness and peace.

The shepherds on the hillside outside Bethlehem would have hoped for a quiet night out. Of course, being out in the fields was normal for them. But every night brought its fears and worries. You never know what's beyond the flickering light of the camp fire: wild animals preying on vulnerable sheep; thieves hoping to grab what they can; soldiers of the Roman occupation out for trouble. The shepherds' ears are alert to any snap of a broken stick, any rustle of movement, any change in the air. Please give us a quiet night! May all be at peace!

The shepherds did not get the quiet they hoped for; and as for peace? – that's open to interpretation! 'Do not be afraid,' the angel said, for human instinct is to fear what we do not understand. Shepherd eyes are dazzled with brightness. Their minds are confused by a baffling message. Their ears are accosted by the whole angelic army singing – not a war-song, but a peace anthem: '*Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to all on whom God's favour rests.*'

God's peace on earth is finally announced, as had been prophesied by Isaiah. The shepherds will be those with 'beautiful feet' who bring good news! But what sort of peace was it? Certainly it wasn't the peace of a quiet night out, nor a feeling of calm inside. Nor was it instantly the end of all war, aggression, aggravation and thuggery. But it wasn't either the forced peace of the so-called *Pax Romana*, the peace imposed by Caesar's legions that left people too scared to resist injustice and oppression (a pattern that is too often still around today). Peace will not come through fear.

The shepherds are summoned to go and witness and be part of a different sort of peace. This peace begins with the vulnerability of a baby, born and cared for in an outhouse. What could be less threatening than that? (although of course Herod managed to find it a big threat!) It's a peace that is nurtured through humility and the renunciation of power. It's a peace that insists on reaching to the heart of human differences, and keeps working until true reconciliation is found and new relationships forged. The shepherds get a foretaste of that peace as they go and meet the holy family, and worship the Christ-child in the manger.

Nowadays the city of Bethlehem is no 'little town' but a busy city, and normally at Christmas there is a real party atmosphere, with Christmas lights bejewelling Manger Square and thousands coming in for the festival. This year, everything is overshadowed by the brutal realities of awful violence in Gaza, southern Israel, and the West Bank.

At the Evangelical Lutheran Church they have prepared a Nativity Scene with a difference. Essentially, it's a pile of rubble – broken bricks and concrete and plaster. The Christ-child lies among the wreckage. Shepherds, wise men, Mary and Joseph are around the edges, as if they are searching the debris for him.



Pastor Munther Isaac reminds us that if Jesus were born today it might be under such rubble. Indeed, this is where he is to be found. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, even in and through the most awful things human beings do to one another. God's peace project begins with sharing the pain and suffering and sorrow. It doesn't stop there. Inspired by our worship, there is power to transform the debris of lives and communities, to rebuild, to find something new and vibrant. This is a long-term project: it works from within, is maintained by hope, and inspires a message of peace and justice and reconciliation for all.

'The Word was made flesh and dwelled among us' – the eternal God, a tiny baby. To some, that may make him an irrelevance. To those who understood nothing, he seemed a threat. He is the misunderstood light that shines in the darkness, and yet ultimately gives light to all people. He is the child through whom we all can become children of God. Through Jesus, God cries out to us to meet him, and to know him, and know there is mercy and forgiveness available to all. Through him, all our fears are quenched, the warring within ourselves is calmed, and we will know peace. It does not mean that all struggle is ended – far from it – but it does mean that in Jesus we become our most authentic selves.

Why have we come this evening? For a quiet night out? – that's no bad thing. To find peace? We do find it here, perhaps more peace than we bargain for. To be enlisted into God's peace project? To join the army of angels in their peace-anthems? It's what God calls us to. First, we must meet with the holy child, the prince of peace. Meeting him, we allow his peace to flood our lives and reconcile us to God, to one-another and to the whole creation.