

Christmas Eve

I would like you to cast your minds back to your childhood for a moment.

You are in bed.

It's Christmas Eve.

And I wonder, were you, like me, given strict instructions not to wake your parents too early the next morning?

'Now, I don't want to hear a peep out of you until 7 o'clock' came the word. *'If you get up too early you'll be tired all day and you won't enjoy it'*.

You wake. You wonder. Should you get up?

How were you to know what the time was? There was no clock and it was dark.

So, being awake, I lay in bed holding my breath, afraid to make a sound. I wondered just how long I was going to have to wait.

What time was it?

And then, I heard footsteps coming down the landing... one, two three, four - was it one of my parents?

Was I about to be told to turn over and go back to sleep, or was it really 7 o'clock?

It seemed like for ever, but eventually the door handle turned and Dad came in.

'OK' he said *'Up you get, it's Christmas. You may go and see if Father Christmas has been.'*

I was reminded of that episode as I read those wonderful verses from tonight's Old Testament lesson

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who bring good tidings

Of course those words weren't written for me in my childhood - they were written for a far more serious situation than that.

Most of the Israelite nation had been taken away from Jerusalem and were in exile in Babylon. A few stragglers had remained in the almost deserted city but the great majority were many miles away.

Nevertheless, even though they were few in number, those who were left kept watchman on the walls. And suddenly one of them shouts out that he can see a messenger coming from the direction of Babylon.

What would the messenger bring?

Would it be good news or bad news?

Would it be further humiliation and defeat or the return of the exiles?

Everyone who was left in Jerusalem rushed to the walls and peered out.

At first all they could see was the dust cloud that the messenger kicked up with his feet. Then they could make out the shape of his body. Then they could see him place each weary foot in front of the other - he'd come a long way from Babylon and was exhausted.

But the watchers on the walls were thrilled to see him and watched him draw ever closer.

When at last he arrived, weary and travel-worn he has just enough strength to gasp out:

'The exiles are coming back. There's a new king in Babylon. God's been away from Jerusalem, but now he's back. God's in charge and soon all the world will know it.'

Well of course we have no idea exactly what this messenger said, but Isaiah saw fit to enshrine the moment in his prophecy:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'

So why do we read this passage from the bible at Christmas?

Well, the answer is quite simple.

Tonight we celebrate the return of the Lord to Zion.

Of course God never really goes away – he is always with us, he is always present, but because he is invisible, we don't always recognise it.

Not only that, sometimes it feels rather as though God has lost interest in us.

But Jesus the Son of God has put an end to all that

On Christmas Day, Jesus was born in Bethlehem which is just down the road from Jerusalem.

At that first Christmas, God came to earth. God is among his people - and although we cannot see him, he is still here and he is never going away.

So *'Wake up, it's Christmas'* is good news, every year.

That is what John is trying to tell us in those amazing words with which he begins his Gospel.

They are some of the best known words in the bible - in whatever language or translation you want to read it.

Here, at the beginning of his Gospel, St John piles up the images of Christ to which he will return again and again.

Christ is the word of God - not just in spoken terms but also in terms of God's thought, God's reason and God's intelligence.

Christ is not just the life-giver, he is Life itself.

Christ is the Light with which God-endowed his world on the first Sunday of Creation and which has been with us ever since.

And all this is summed up in the person of a man, a man who as well as sharing the essence of the Godhead, also shares the being of a simple local carpenter.

Sometimes we use quite extravagant language when we speak of present day celebrities or stars - the superlatives drip from the journalist's lips, but even the most extravagant superlative comes nowhere near the immense significance that St John claims for Jesus Christ.

And tonight, the Word, the Life and the Light of the World is presented to us as a helpless baby, born of a young mother in the dark and cold of a stable.

It's a story we know so well.

It's one we've heard time and time again.

And yet it is one we never tire of hearing or singing about.

True there are some who are deaf to it or who might see it as no more than a passing reminder of what the season is about.

After all, a birth is easy to understand and it's not difficult for us to paint in our minds eye a sanitized picture of that first Christmas.

A blue clad Mary serenely going into a warm and cosy stable with co-operative animals around her who didn't much mind giving up their feed trough for the infant Jesus - it's painted on Christmas cards up and down the land.

But the reality was perhaps rather different. Joseph and Mary were tired, they were hungry, they were frightened.

They had nowhere to stay. The baby could have been born in the street - there could have been no stable, no shelter, no where for poor young mother to lay her child.

But even in those desperate straights, God is there to help. Agreed you might have thought he could have done rather better than a stable round the back, but he provides enough.

There is shelter, there is warmth and there is somewhere to lay the infant Jesus.

There are visitors to admire and adore; the angels, the shepherds and later the wise men - the Magi.

And tonight there is us.

We too may visit the stable in our hearts and our minds and we too can adore the Christ child we shall find there.

So this Christmastide carry in your hearts and minds the memory that 2000 years ago in a stable, in a far off land, was born the Saviour of the World and give thanks to God for the greatest Christmas present the world has ever known.

For the simplicity that surrounds his birth is what lies at the heart of Christmas. It is this that speaks through the tinsel and glitter, the turkey and Christmas pudding, the glitz and the glamour.

In that tiny helpless babe lies the hope of the world, the Word made flesh.

And that means that the message, '*Wake up it's Christmas*' really is Good News.

Amen.

Mike Rogers