

## **Great Bealings Carol Service**

It is not often that I preach in semi darkness! But it has prompted me to remind you of one of the darkest and most memorable nativity scenes ever painted - by the remarkable, inspiring artist, Rembrandt or, was it a pupil of his? You will know this painting: 'The Adoration of the Shepherds'.

The shepherds have just rushed into the barn: a boy holding a dog, a woman with a child in her arms, a few men and two other women, with a girl struck with wonder in between them, all ordinary people. Some continue to talk, but those who have seen Jesus in the manger have suddenly become silent. Mary sits near her first-born, surrounding him with care, and Joseph stands behind them. The splendour of God shines no more from above around the shepherds. Only the new-born child is lit up by a lamp behind the kneeling man, and the human faces reflect the light of this and other oil-lamps. At first sight nothing extraordinary seems to happen in this scene from rural life. Yet as one meditates upon the predominantly dark and brown painting, one is overcome with the same awe which the persons around the infant Jesus express with different gestures.

In Bishop Martin's last Christmas message to us, he reminds us of Isaiah's words, written around 540 BC, as foretelling the coming of Christ: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." It is this light and glow which dominates the infant in our painting, God in our midst, or as our Gospel

from St John declared so wonderfully: “The true light that enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

Darkness. We know what darkness is, says Bishop Martin:

“We think of people living in the midst of war, conflict and violence around the world. We think of people living in poverty, hungry, without shelter, in other countries of course, but shockingly, here at home too. We think of people who suffer violence and abuse. We think of people facing serious illness, suffering depression, the bewildered and beleaguered, the overwhelmed. We can all name the darkness. It is real. In Scripture the darkness is injustice, cruelty, poverty, sickness, oppression. And the darkness is also a world that has forgotten God, acting out of its collective amnesia.”

We so need to remember and cherish the words of our carols and readings tonight. I think of the memorable line...

“But in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.”

I think of a specially written carol by Kenneth Cragg in response to our painting:

“When Rembrandt bathes in shadows  
The birth where peasants gaze  
God’s artistry he hallows  
In silhouettes of praise.”

All babies hold our attention and God's gift of love invites a response. The adoration of this baby, Jesus, by those who have come closest is very striking. Here is light in darkness and 'God in ordinary', coming to us again in cold countryside.