‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people’

This has been a hard year. This will be a strange and difficult Christmas. In our church we have an empty chair.

The empty chair was an image used by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, when he was interviewed with the Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, about their experiences of grief. Both men had lost a child. The Archbishop’s daughter was seven months old when she died in a car crash. The Chief Rabbi’s daughter died of cancer aged 30.

Justin Welby said that for many people this Christmas would have an empty chair. Maybe someone they have lost this year, or a previous year. Or maybe someone they just can’t be with this Christmas. Families are separated, we cannot meet as usual.

So we have an empty chair in our church, I think we all have someone who sits in that chair for us.

‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people’

The first message of the angels is – do not be afraid. That command echoes through the bible. In every encounter with God, from the very beginning, God is constantly telling his people, do not be afraid.

In our Christmas story it is a reminder that angels are not the angels of our school nativities. Angels are not small girls with wings and tinsel. Angels are messengers and warriors. In stained glass windows they are mostly depicted wearing armour and carrying swords. Perhaps not so politically correct these days, but the point is made. When the shepherds encountered angels they were afraid.

Now shepherds weren’t softies. Shepherds in those days where rough and they were tough. If you want a modern comparison think of a gang of hells angels. People didn’t trust shepherds. They lived outside the fringe of society, in a court of law a shepherd’s evidence was worthless.

So it is strange that when God wanted some witnesses to his Son’s arrival it was shepherds who were chosen. People whose witness wasn’t acceptable.

God is about change. Christmas is about making a difference.

‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people’

The poet Thomas Traherne, sometimes referred to as the happiest of men, used to say that “You are as prone to love as the sun is to shine.” (Repeat).

Sometimes the truth of that becomes visible. There is a story about Nelson Mandela when he was President of South Africa. He went to a restaurant for a meal, accompanied as usual by his bodyguards and security staff. As he waited for his meal he noticed a man sitting alone, also waiting for his food to arrive. Nelson Mandela called the man over and invited him to sit with them.

The man joined them, but his head was down. He ate in silence, his hand constantly trembling. When he had eaten he left.

The President’s security staff assumed the man must have been ill, but Mandela said no. “I know that man. When I was a prisoner he was a guard. He used to beat and torture me. I think he was afraid I would now do the same to him. But that is not how we handle things.”

Mandela knew that the only way to overcome evil is to love, the only way to banish violence is to forgive, the only way to heal division is to show compassion.

He said, “No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people’

The first step is always to not be afraid. It is fear that turns people to hatred. It is fear that generates violence. It is fear that disables us from seeing the reality – that we are as prone to love as the sun is to shine.

Such love is costly, as our empty chair reminds us, but this is what is at the heart of Christmas. That God so loves the world that he gives us his Son.

The Christmas story ends with Mary and Joseph taking their child and fleeing for their lives. They became refugees seeking asylum in Egypt, this story does not end with – and they all lived happily ever after. We forget the dark side of Christmas, that the birth of this child was not good news of great joy for all the people. Herod for one saw in this child a challenge to his rule of tyranny and oppression. At the other end of Christmas, Candlemas, we hear the words of Simeon – this child is destined for the falling and rising of many, and to be a sign that will be opposed.

This child makes a difference. Those who are not afraid of what he brings are those who receive the good news of great joy.

This Christmas is a strange and difficult one for many. In most homes there will be an empty chair. We know this Christmas to have a bitter sweetness. But in that moment we perhaps come closer to hearing the message of the angels – do not be afraid. For God acts in love, slowly, patiently, quietly, humbly, in weakness and vulnerability, to give us hope, and when we sense the distance of others, to know God is with us.

Blessed art thou,

O Christmas Christ,

that thy cradle was so low

that shepherds,

poorest and simplest of earthly folk,

could yet kneel beside it,

and look level-eyed into the face of God. Amen.