“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Last week some gas engineers dug up a road. A small boy who lived in the road was fascinated by their machinery and the large hole they created. He asked if they were digging for treasure. When he came home from school there was a parcel on the doorstep – it contained a bag of gold chocolate coins. There was note – “We found the treasure” – signed by the gas men.

That story was on the internet, so it must be true. But true or not the fact that it was upvoted to the front page meant that it made a connection with a lot of people.

Another story, much older, but absolutely true.

A prison chaplain was visiting an inmate for a service of Holy Communion. Such visits were only permitted once every six months and were strictly supervised by a prison guard. When they reached the Peace the prisoner stopped the service and went over to the guard who was supervising.

He addressed the guard by name – “Brand, are you a Christian?” The guard replied that he was. “Well then, you must take off your cap, and join us around this table. You cannot sit apart. This is Holy Communion, and we must share and receive it together.”

To the chaplain’s astonishment the guard meekly removed his cap, joined the circle, and received Communion.

The chaplain’s name was Harry Wiggett. The guard was Christo Brand. The prisoner was Nelson Mandela.

It was a small act – to address another person by their name, to see in them a fellow human being, to invite them to belong.

It was a small act – yet it bridged huge differences. The guard held all the power, represented all the authority. The prisoner had nothing, nothing except respect for a fellow human being - and an absolute refusal to allow history to determine the future.

It was a small act – but with hindsight we can see in it the process by which change was made possible. Change in individuals, change in a nation, change that has echoed around our world. By countless such small acts is our future crafted. Small acts often connect with people’s lives. They give us hope, and this is a time of hope.

The refusal to give up on others is at the heart of Christmas, simply because God refuses to give up on us. This is another small act – the birth of a child. In individual lives of course each birth is momentous. Yet viewed over the entirety of human history one single birth, long ago, far away, hardly registers. There were many births that night, most of them have no relevance for us today.

Yet we claim that this birth is relevant, that this child, these parents, are connected to our lives. This child – this small act of human fragility – makes a difference. If human destiny is crafted by countless small acts, then here it is radically reshaped.

In prison Nelson Mandela faced the reality of choice – how people on opposite sides of conflict determine each other’s response and reactions. He, and others, came to realise that good news has to be good news for everyone, or it is good news for no-one.

We live in a world which contains much that makes us anxious and fearful. I sometimes think that you hardly dare turn on the news or open the paper for fear of whatever new tragedy might confront us. We can only take so much bad news – the cynicism which pervades British culture is a symptom of a people who are weary of disappointment. It suggests we have given up on hope, worse still, we have given up on ourselves. We need to be reminded that God does not give up on us.

There are those who suspect that Christmas is nothing more than sentimental escapism, wishful thinking for how our world might be. As Alan Sugar says to Father Christmas, it’s a nice idea, but it’s not a business plan. Or is it?

There was question asked on the same internet forum last week – “Are you really happy or just really comfortable?” It’s an interesting question. Are you really happy, or just really comfortable? The comments in response were rather sad – most people said they’d settle for whatever comfort they could get. They’d given up on happiness, echoed in a comment I believe is attributed to Pope Francis, our “technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy”

Christmas is a time of big expectations, many we know to be unrealistic, many will give up on hoping for too much. Yet maybe we need to learn to hope for more.

Don’t believe all you read on the internet, but all the same, if you listen to what people are saying there is still a message to be heard. We may live in a cynical and disbelieving world, but stories of hope still connect. And usually it is the small acts that connect the most. There’s something important going on in small acts.

At our crib service earlier this evening everyone was given a coloured glow stick, the type you snap and shake and they glow different colours. Seeing the church in darkness filled with people waving multi-coloured glowsticks I am always reminded of Desmond Tutu’s message that we are a Rainbow People of God.

He was of course a hugely important part of the fight against apartheid, but more importantly, his integrity, humility and authority made him a key part bringing reconciliation to a deeply divided people. Where most expected civil war to ensue he chaired South Africa’s Truth & Reconciliation Commission.

When he was asked what was his most life changing moment Desmond Tutu remembered that when he was a small boy, about nine, he was walking with his mother to her work as a domestic servant. They met a white priest, a tall white priest wearing a black cassock and a hat – the priest stopped – and doffed his hat to Desmond’s mother. Tutu said it was mind blowing – that a white man should doff his hat to a black servant was “the biggest defining moment in my life.” The priest was Trevor Huddleston, whose fierce passion for justice Tutu himself emulated.

Small acts, seemingly so insignificant, can change a life, can change a nation, can change history. We know this to be true, therefore there is hope. There is always hope. God never gives up on us.

Christmas is at the turn of the year, when we are past the shortest day and the longest night, and we start to push back the darkness. We look to the future, and we wonder.

It will not be an easy future, we know this to be true, but we can change its course – we can make a difference. Small acts – ordinary people. That’s where things important can happen. If there is one thing you take with you from this night, let it be a determination to believe in small acts, because small acts are possible, and they work miracles.