

**Archbishop Peter Smith's Homily  
Christmas Midnight Mass – 2011  
Saint George's Cathedral, Southwark**

My dear brothers and sisters, when we look back at the news headlines over the past year, many of them have been anything but good. There has been a continuous stream of bad news: from the on-going tragedy of the war in Afghanistan to the civil disturbances and deaths in countries involved in the so-called "Arab Spring". We have witnessed a series of natural disasters - earthquakes and floods in Japan and Asia, famine in East Africa, and in this past week more devastating floods in the Philippines and yet another earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand. These natural disasters have occurred in the shadow of the deepening financial crisis and global economic recession which has brought its own suffering to so many - growing unemployment, especially amongst the young, rising prices and a growing gap between the rich and the poor. And in England last summer we saw appalling scenes of rioting, violence and destruction by a small number of criminals and disaffected young people. The list could go on!

Yet, in the midst of this bleak and depressing picture we have also witnessed some wonderful examples of light and hope. Alerted to the famine in Africa, within weeks the people of this country donated more than £40 million to help the starving; and more recently, another £27 million for the BBC's "Children in Need" appeal despite the severe economic difficulties we all face. Following the riots here in London, we saw local communities spontaneously getting together to help clear up the damage and offering comfort and help to the victims. And many of us will have experienced acts of goodness and kindness at a more personal level - in our families and in our neighbourhoods day by day. So despite all the gloom and anxiety, the light and goodness of the human spirit has continued to shine out in the midst of adversity. Those acts of good neighbourliness remind us that although we human beings can be selfish and self-seeking, our human nature is basically good.

And as we celebrate this wonderful feast of the Incarnation, we see why that is. For tonight we rejoice in the fact that the Almighty and Merciful God, who created us in his own image and likeness, reached out in love and became one like us in all things but sin. Isaiah prophesied that unique moment in history: "The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow, a light has shone ... for there is a child born for us, a son given to us." On the night that Christ was born, Luke tells us that the angel appeared to the shepherds and said, "Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." He is, in the words of St. John, "a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower", because the truth is that in that vulnerable, new-born child "we see our God made visible and so are caught up in the God we cannot see."

He came to save us from our self-centredness and isolation, and to show us through his own example how to reach out to others in that love which is always life-giving. He came to meet us where we are, and immersed himself fully in our confused and messy world, asking us to open our hearts to welcome him.

Reflecting on that, reminded me of the famous painting by Holman Hunt entitled "Christ the Light of the World". In that painting, Christ is depicted standing in the darkness of the night, with a lantern in his hand, knocking at a door. The door is covered by climbing plants and brambles, and clearly hasn't been opened for a very long time. And when you look more closely at the door, you see that there is no handle on it. Was this an oversight by the artist, a mistake? No, it wasn't. It was a deliberate omission, because Holman Hunt's insight was based on the words of the Book of Revelation, Christ "stands at the door and knocks." He longs to come in, but waits patiently to be admitted, because the door to our hearts can only be opened from the inside.

So if there are times when we feel afraid to approach God, through guilt, through apprehension, or feelings of unworthiness, we need to take to heart again the message of the angel to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid." Why? Because in this new-born child in Bethlehem, we are invited to see and experience the sheer tenderness of the love and compassion that he offers unconditionally to all who are willing to open their hearts to him. And that love has the power to transform our lives, and enable us to love others as he has first loved us.

The challenge for each one of us is to allow Jesus Christ to be born again in our own hearts; to allow his love to become incarnate in us and share it with others. Then we become lights which bring hope to a world which at times seems to grow so dark with selfishness and sin. He calls us is to continue his work of love by making our own unique contribution to the task of healing human brokenness, to fostering peace and harmony in human relationships, and to bringing a little of his light into the darkness and confusion of the world in which we live. We don't need to be anxious or afraid, because the great joy of Christmas, the good news that we celebrate tonight is simple yet profound: that no matter how deep or oppressive the darkness in our world or in our own hearts, the light of God's love and compassion is always brighter, stronger and more enduring. That is the good news we celebrate tonight.