

Christmas Eve/Day 2025 All Souls' **THE EVERLASTING LIGHT** dtw

At the end of 1866 Phillips Brooks, a renowned American preacher – then the youthful rector of Holy Trinity Church, Philadelphia – made a pilgrimage to Palestine (as it was known then). On Christmas Eve he rode on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and late that night, visited the Field of the Shepherds before joining in a service in the ancient Basilica which marks the traditional site of Jesus' birth.

The experience of that night deeply impressed Brooks, and on his return to Philadelphia he wrote a hymn for the children of his Sunday School to sing the next Christmas: *O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!*

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;

Yet in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light;

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Yes, it is in the darkness of Bethlehem that the story of Christmas begins; where all our hopes and fears are met, and this hymn echoes those famous words from that great Christmas Gospel: the Prologue of St John: 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it' (Jn1.5) Surely these simple words disclose the whole purpose of God at Christmas and his purpose for this particular Christmas. The Jewish Festival Hanukkah, just before Christmas, and recently celebrated around our world (but horribly obliterated at Bondi), is also a Festival of Light.

As a child I was afraid of the dark – especially if I had to venture outside our house to go to the shops for my father or something like that. There weren't as many street lights in those days. Dad often sent me out for cigarettes to the corner shop: "20 Rothmans Plain please". Kids could buy cigarettes in those days. Crazy. I would run so fast, hoping that nothing would catch me and take refuge while I caught my breath under a lamp post. Complete darkness in a strange place is still an unnerving thought, and so many terrible and sad things happen at night. Yet, in the midst of this – in the midst of a thing we fear: darkness – Christ was born. We don't know exactly when, but one thing we do know. He was born at night. A bright star shone above the place – the shepherds saw it. A few years ago it was even reported that scientists have tracked down that great light with their modern astronomy software programs; it was probably the joining of Venus and Jupiter in the night sky. The wise men followed it too; the Bible actually doesn't mention three of them; there could have been a hundred, there could have been two, the Bible only mentions three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Some of it could well be legend. But hey, I'm actually giving my wife *three* small gifts this Christmas. I think that's a *wise* move don't you? Maybe she'll think I'm a bit of a *legend* too! But I digress.

This story, full of wonder, we hear again and again each Christmas, is there to remind us that the love of God was revealed amidst the tragedy and sorrow of this world as well as the joy. This birth was into a humble family and an oppressed people, a place that is still so full of trouble and oppression today. It was census time in Bethlehem and there was no room in the inn. But the darkness and the gloom could not overcome the purpose of God. In a stable, dark and smelly, the Prince of Peace and Light was born.

Friends, out in the dark, whatever else there may be, be it loneliness, despair, the loss of a job, breakdown, depression, sickness; out in the dark there is always Christ. 'In the dark streets shineth the everlasting light'. We all know how much comfort even a little light can be in the dark. Perhaps you like a night-light on, especially in a strange place or you have one on in the passage when nature calls in the middle of the night? It's so comforting isn't it? Remember this too: whenever the darkness feels strong in your life, how much stronger then becomes the light.

The things of light are many; some you will find if you look carefully into the stable of Christ's birth. Amazing love; strong relationship: woman and man, parent and child. The beauty of creation: the animals and hay. The sense of absolute wonder in the Word made Flesh: adoration and joy. Things which rich and poor, high and low alike can cherish; above all, a purpose for being. Christmas, we say, more truly perhaps than we know, is a time for children. By this we generally mean it is a time when children come to the forefront of our attention, but Christmas stirs the child within each one of *us*! We gather, just as eager, around our Christmas trees to open presents, pull our bonbons at the table, laugh, maybe cry, at the sheer magic of it all.

Yet Christmas summons us with a more compelling insistence still; that we actually *become* as children again. Ours *is* often too painfully an adult world: one of alarming extremism, of increasing terror and violence - it came so horribly to our shores at Bondi 10/11 days ago - of grinding inhumanity, technological enslavement and of moral bankruptcy. These and a multitude of other ills tell us all too clearly that it is adults who lay waste God's world and deface his image in one another. Christmas comes to rescue us from such destructive folly, not by calling us to childish make-believe or adult fantasy, but by placing a sobering truth right *in* our back yard: Emmanuel: God with us - God bringing to birth the Child that is in each one of us, if we would *receive* and love him. And so:

O holy Child of Bethlehem descend to us, we pray;

Cast out our sins and enter in: be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell:

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Amen.