Christmas Midnight

 **GOD IS WITH US**

Luke, in his gospel (Lk 2:1-14), is careful to locate the birth of Jesus at a precise time and in a definite place. The person we know as Jesus Christ was born at a historical moment, in Bethlehem, to a woman called Mary.

From that moment, **God is with us** in three special ways.

**First,** the scene of the birth is set in the darkness of night. But it is not only physical darkness. The world into which Jesus was born was desperately dark, not unlike our world today. But as Isaiah prophesied (Is 9:1-6): “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.”

Tonight, the whole darkened world is bathed in the light of God’s glory, just as it was two thousand years ago: “the glory of the Lord shone round” the shepherds. God is with us here in Australia, and everywhere else, “to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk 1:79).

**Second**, God is with us in the joy and peace that he brings. We see on TV the burnt-out streets of towns, and we wonder: how can those people cope with so much death and destruction? Isaiah witnessed similar scenes of desolation. Again, he prophesied, “You have made their gladness greater, you have made their joy increase; they rejoice in your presence.”

Tonight, in the midnight Mass, the bright messenger from God will proclaim, “I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people.” We join them, together with the throng of spirits who suddenly burst into the first Christmas night, praised God, and sang, “Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth.”

After all that the shepherds had seen and heard, they “went back glorifying and praising God”, so great was the joy and peace that the child had brought them. Tonight, we are the shepherds. We too will return to our ordinary life, glorifying and praising God.

**Third,** God is with us in a most personal and approachable way in Mary’s child, who is as close to us as our next-door neighbour. In fact, he identifies himself with our neighbour.

There is nothing frightening about a defenceless baby, born of lowly parents in a shelter for domestic animals, and recognised by plain people, the local shepherds, who were in fact outcasts from society. God is closest to us when he appears least divine, when God became the baby of an unknown Israelite girl.

St Francis and St Clare of Assisi were both overwhelmed by the poverty of Jesus at his birth. St Francis was lost in wonder over it when he wrote: “The Most Holy Child whom we love has been given to us, and was born for us along the way, and laid in a manger.” St Clare exclaimed in amazement, “What marvellous humility! Astonishing poverty! The King of Angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger.”

So, in the Christmas season, we remember that God is with us as the light piercing the darkness of our minds and of the world that we live in; also in the joy and peace that underlies our sorrows and striving. We recall that God is with us especially in Mary’s child, born into a benighted world, the true light that enlightens everyone (Jn 1:9), and the source of genuine joy and peace.

Brothers and sisters, may the humble Son of God be with you, not only during this blessed Christmas night, but in every moment of your life, also in the dark moments. May the Christ Child bring you joy and peace always, while we celebrate his birth two thousand years ago, his staying with us ever since then, and his presence among us now.