Christmas Day
A very happy Christmas Day to you all! There is a lot of happiness around us and we have seen it develop over recent weeks and days. That is very good, for we are in the business of celebration. What greater event could there ever be? God taking our humanity and being born as a child. He took our humanity and laughed and cried with us. He took on all the cares which beset us and carried them as we have to. Here is God taking our humanity upon Himself in the form of a child in an uncertain world. That is what we celebrate. That fact, and all the things which flow from it.

As a small boy, I remember being caught up in a game of opposites. If one person said ‘good’ the next person said the opposite - ‘bad’. If one said ‘glad’ the next person said ‘sad’, and so on. I only remember that game because, for a youngster, it was a way of limiting the way things happened in the world of opposites. If they weren't good, they were bad. If they weren't happy, they were sad. So it went on. Thinking back, it was a simple way of recognising much of human life - of what is good and what is bad.

When things seem to be going well, then something seems to pop up which suggests the opposite.  To a small boy, it seemed we could never have a run of good things, because something intervened which was bad, and upset it all. The small boy was being helped to see that life is never straightforward but often consisted of opposites.

Think like the small boy for a moment. We are being faced with the reality that life is never easy or straightforward. There are always things which upset the general run day by day. Life is a mixture, but God helps us to make sense of it because He is involved in it. Caught up in it.

Think of all those people crowded in the country's second airport. They have been getting ready for family meetings and the like this Christmas. They turn up for their planes to find them cancelled or diverted. Because of drones. We know why. It didn't just happen. It was a deliberate attempt to cause chaos and confusion. But in the midst of the bitterness and anger, there were people who did the kindest things, helping those in difficulty and trouble to find a way of getting home, or if not, getting nearer to their hoped-for destination. Someone will probably write up a series of stories to illustrate that, whilst there were those determined to cause chaos, confusion, and disruption, there were equally those who offered help in so many different ways to alleviate distress and near despair.

If you think on a wider scale, there was the tsunami in Indonesia caused by the natural blow-out of a volcano and the movement of huge areas of stone plates. Loss of life there has been mitigated by local aid and the dash of foreign aid to this part of the world. Human distress has been lessened by help from within the country and from outside. From a Christian perspective, we can say God works in a mysterious way.

Reading the Christmas story, we see that God is caught up in both sides of it. At the human level, Mary and Joseph are caught up in the rush to register, to be formally recognised in the state system. Everywhere is crowded. Where can they stay? Here is an emergency, if ever there was one. Someone can offer a cattle stall. That will have to do.

Their journey was hurried. No leisurely packing up. The gospels use the Greek word sparganon. I can tell you it means getting together bits of clothing and material which are near at hand. No such thing as a layette. At His birth our Lord was wrapped in things which were just handy, as his parents made the journey to be registered. They had to move speedily, with no time to sort out clothing. It was just a matter of collecting a few necessaries together and getting under way. Maybe we know the feeling.

As you recall the story of the birth of our Lord, you get the feeling that it was all hurried, with little preparation, and the witnesses, whether human or otherwise, just seem to drop in en passant you might say, though their words and actions all have eternal relevance about them. So the story unfolds and all the characters find their places and take up their roles. We are left with a picture that each one is there for a reason, but that inside, within the spectacle, God is at work giving everything its proper place and purpose. As we see it all in our mind’s eye, we are being reminded that God takes the givenness of situations and shows us how we can contribute to bringing order out of chaos, and by using some of that givenness for good. We see this in many situations every day. God can use even the simplest act of kindness, the gentlest word of hope and encouragement, to change things for the better. Behind all the things which may appear unhelpful to us today, there is the activity of God, the sheer power of God working through individuals to bring change and bring hope for the future.

Someone once sent me a Christmas card which said, "Beyond this Christmas there are new beginnings to come. Look out for them lest they pass you by." The message is not to give in, but to keep going. To keep alive the advent theme of watching. Look out for those new beginnings where God is hard at work for you and me, and as I also believe, for us all.

I pray that your happiness this Christmas may also be full of hope for the future. God is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble. Stand firm on that hope. Let it be your watchword for this Christmas and beyond.