

Tonight in the darkness, in the warmth of this church, in the light of candles we will place ourselves at the stable where Jesus was born. In our imaginations we will go there and watch and listen. We will imagine ourselves as silent observers, caught up in the mystery and wonder of it all. I know that the way I imagine it is that there was great tranquility, hushed voices and respectful adoration, even worship.

But the Gospel for tonight makes it sound very different. It was perhaps very noisy, chaotic and busy. There is a lot going on.

For Mary and Joseph it was tense. Having a baby, far from home, family support and with a long journey to get through. Mary had her worries as a pregnant woman. Joseph, an about-to-be dad, must have been full of anxiety about safety he could not provide.

Then there were shepherds charging in and neighbours looking in. And the story includes the arrival of a whole crowd of servants, body-guards and Magi. These high level guests would have left everyone feeling a bit overwhelmed.

So really, this scene, which I think of as quiet and serene, was probably rather stressful and chaotic.

I think this is worth remembering. Often I think that the life of Jesus, or of this Saint or that Holy Person, was very ordered, calm and thought through. I imagine they lived in this circle of peacefulness, and it was always tranquil. My life, by contrast, seems jumbled and driven by circumstances beyond my control. Things happen that I do not expect. People around me behave like people do; unpredictably! Life is actually a muddle that I work my way through. This, on reflection, must have been how Mary and Joseph experienced the birth of their first child. It was a muddle that they worked their way through.

So, for us that is good news. We don't have to arrive at Christmas, at the family meal, at the altar tonight, or anywhere, with all our lives neatly ordered. We do not have to present God with our lives laid out like a Grade 10 project, all colour coded and neatly labeled. God actually is OK with messiness and life as an ongoing project.

Each of you here is here because you want to be close to God. Each of you wants to offer God your lives, perhaps feeling that they are somehow not quite ready to be inspected. But God knows you.

God knows the disappointments and pain that you carry deep in your souls. God knows the longing that you have for relationships to be healed and made better. God knows of the triumphs and successes that you treasure. God knows the bits of you that are broken or battered. And above all, God knows you are not finished, or finished with. God knows it is messy and chaotic and confusing and uncertain, as well as joyful and exciting and hopeful.

We are more like the real Mary and Joseph than we might have thought.

When you walk up to receive communion later in this service, imagine that you are walking into the centre of that scene in the stable. Remember it is imperfect. It is messy. No one knows, for sure, just what might happen next. And remember that no one, posh or scruffy, certain or unsure, was turned away from their desire to be with this little piece of the divine nestled in his mother's arm. And remember, You are welcome, just as you are. Welcome without judgement. Welcome only with love.