Archbishop Stephen writes in today's Sunday Express, on the eve of Christmas

I wonder what gives you joy at Christmas? Perhaps it is being with family – or not! Perhaps it is in food that is shared. The special meal that is cooked. Maybe it is the look of unadulterated delight on the face of a child unwrapping a gift. Perhaps it is in offering help to others: looking out for the neighbour who is alone. Volunteering in the food bank or homeless shelter. It could be the words of a familiar carol, or maybe the face of a loved one illuminated by candlelight.

It strikes me that we live at such a fast pace now, that we often don't have time to stop. To notice and clock what is going on around us. We are sold so many different versions of Christmas in the adverts in our newspapers or on the TV that we might be forgiven for thinking that commerce is king and if we have enough money we can buy the perfect Christmas. But deep down each of us knows that isn't true.

At the heart of the Christmas story is a new family, celebrating a new birth. Anyone who has been privileged to cradle a new born child knows something of what wonder and joy are about. New life causes the hardest of hearts to melt. It speaks of potential and hope, of promise and the future. The fragility and vulnerability of a new-born makes us want to protect and nurture.

So as Mary and Joseph cradle their baby, Jesus, we see something extraordinary of how God chooses to share his life with us. In the fragility and vulnerability of a new born infant we see the hope that God offers us. There is wonder. There is joy. In the borrowed stable, in a world of political uncertainty, despite shepherds and wise men, chaos and confusion, new birth brings new hope. And even more so with the birth of this particular baby because this is God who shares his life with us. Who will grow up to challenge us about how we might live for others.

Whoever we are, whatever our circumstances Jesus offers us a way to live. A way to find joy, a way to have hope. A way to navigate the uncertainty of the world in which we live.

And joy and hope are things I think we need more of in our hurting world. We continue to struggle with the cost of living, with questions of migration and asylum, with a health service under severe pressure. There are wars and conflicts raging still in Ukraine and the land in which Jesus was born. The future health and well-being of the planet itself continues to be in grave doubt. There is much that causes us to be afraid and fearful for the future.

The angel who announces the birth of Jesus to shepherds on the Bethlehem hillside starts with words of comfort ‘Do not be afraid, for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people’. There is hope, there is the promise of a different future because of the birth of Jesus.
One of my favourite carols *came upon the midnight clear* puts that moment like this:

And man, at war with man, hears not
The love song which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

That's my prayer for us this Christmas - that we might hear something of the angels' song of love and peace.

In the midst of these days of celebration can I encourage you to make a moment or two to step outside and look up to the heavens, or perhaps go to your local church and join in with the singing and hear the Christmas story once again, or simply to find a few moments of quiet and peace in which you might hear something of that song of love and peace.

For it is in that song and in the birth of Jesus that hope is truly to be found.

In moments of quiet, but also in the noise and delight of the Christmas celebrations I hope you will find joy and peace. However you celebrate I hope you know that God in his son Jesus draws close to us as we are close to those whom we love. For love and joy are at the heart of God and they are at the heart of Christmas.

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