Christmas, in spite of all the changes it has undergone over the years, remains for most people a family celebration, an occasion for families to gather, tell stories, enjoy one another’s company, and share in a special meal.

Although many people in our culture hardly think of it, at the heart of Christmas is a particular family, the family of Joseph, Mary and their new born child. His birth like that of most children is marked by joy, love and a sense of hope. A new born child calls forth from parents and grandparents feelings that are both profound and positive, feelings which seem to rise up from very centre of one’s being.

For Christians, the birth of Jesus is unique in the depth and breadth of the promise and hope that it evokes in us. The message of the angel to the shepherds in today’s gospel reminds us of the joy and peace that have always been so central to the wishes we extend to one another at Christmas. As important, however, as they are, I can’t help but think that what we need more than anything else this year is hope. The pandemic has lasted much longer than the vast majority of us expected or feared. There have been moments over the last months when we thought that it had been defeated and that we would soon return to a pattern of life more or less like the one we used to know. Just a few weeks ago, a traditional kind of Christmas seemed all but assured. Unfortunately, the arrival of Omicron and the continuing virulence of the Delta variant have made that vey difficult.

Hope is neither naiveté nor wishful thinking. It is a feeling and a conviction rooted in our very being and strengthened by our sense of the presence in our lives and in the life of the world of God. Some of the images in the Bible for God may well strike us as strange and yet they are powerful. He is a rock, a fortress, a shield, someone on whom we can leans, or in whom we can find refuge, a friend whom we trust, a light that illuminates the darkness in which we sometimes find ourselves.

Even though today’s first reading was written centuries before the birth of Jesus, it speaks eloquently to what his birth means for us. “The people who walked in darkness,” Isaiah declares, “have seen a great light, those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them the light has shone.”

To live in darkness is to live on the edge of despair. At such moments we find it impossible to see our way forward. The appearance of light, on the other hand, can open up for us new paths, suggest new possibilities, possibilities of which we have perhaps never dreamed. The light is a precondition for hope. It could be the light of love and friendship, of science and technology, of goodness and dedication, of faith and trust.

May our Christmas celebration this year be for us and our families a source of light and of hope, hope for ourselves and one another, hope for our country and for people all around the globe, many of whom face far greater challenges than we do. For them and for us, my prayer today is that the light that radiates from the birth of this child will be for us a beacon and a source of joy, peace, and hope.