It feels like a long time ….. usually on a Sunday I am in the George Eliot Hospital chapel, with a varying number of people, some in their dressing gowns, some wrapped in blankets, and some in overcoats. It’s a particular sort of outworking of Christian unity, as people kind of take off the clothes of their traditions and we just meet - I love the mixture and the unpredictability of it, and watching again and again the simple power of community, liturgy and sacrament.

People at the George Eliot (and by the way, if you heard any rumours that it’s closing, they’re not true) often ask me ‘which is your church then?’ and I say, well, the hospital is my church really … but I live right by the cathedral in Coventry, and that’s where my community is, that’s home. And so being here today is a bit of a homecoming for me, and I’m glad. I preached here last almost a year ago; it was just a few weeks before I was in hospital myself, for some treatment for the MS that had just been diagnosed for me. So it has been a funny sort of year, with a lot of time off work and a lot of hospital appointments. And a whole lot of kindness, much of which has come from you here in so many different ways, and often from people I didn’t even really know. So I’d like to take this moment to say thank you publically for the ways that you have been the body of Christ for me and John, for the gifts and the cards and the prayers. This time this year I am about to do the whole cycle again, with a repeat of the treatment coming in March and then some more weeks off work while my immune system grows back … It’s all going well, as far as we can tell.

So, I’m learning to live with a diagnosis – but the thing I keep realising, is that actually I’m just learning to live with the human condition, like everyone else is, the humanness that means we always live with a mix of limit and possibility. It’s just how it is. And this humanness is where God lives. Call it light in the darkness, maybe. Or the word made flesh, and dwelling amongst us.

Today’s gospel and the psalm are about light coming to dwell in the darkness – and about humanity coming to dwell in the light. In a way it’s what the whole of epiphany is about, light spilling and dwelling everywhere, on everyone, regardless or who or what they are. Maybe it’s why Christian unity week is placed here.

In this bit of Matthew’s gospel we have some huge events bumping up against each other, each one you want to know more about. Scripture is full of these snapshots of people’s lives, sentences that contain massive stories if you stop to look at what the words contain (Actually hospitals are like that too.) Those first sentences in our passage for today are huge: When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake…..

So it starts with bad news. It’s a bit like a diagnosis – this is the truth: John the Baptist, a good man, has been arrested. It is a catalyst event – and it’s not just about John, it’s also about Jesus because it marks a shift of time. John the Baptist’s part is nearly played out; it’s time for Jesus to step onto the stage in this great story of salvation. No wonder he needs to withdraw for a while.

But in itself, this news about John a bad thing. It’s an event that says the world is not a safe place. We can’t count on the right things happening. In fact, we can’t count on anything. We know that so much in our own time too; all the events of the news this week especially bring that into sharp focus: things we thought would never happen are happening. I had a corridor conversation with one of the managers at the hospital this week, she said, it feels that we’re not standing on solid ground any more…..

When Jesus heard his own unsettling news, he withdrew. He left the place where he had been – Nazareth, the place where he had taught in the synagogue and they had hated it – and he made his home in Capernaum. It’s by the lake of Galilee. You can still go there, and walk the streets and see the walls of the houses. Ma}the}w gives us quite precise geographical detail. It helps us to locate Jesus in a real place, at a real time. It helps us to know that it’s not just a story, this coming of God amongst us.

He made his home there. It’s such an important little phrase, taking us right into this season of Epiphany that we’re in. Christmas took us to the beginning of John’s gospel where we heard about the word being made flesh and
dwelling among us – Emmanuel, God is with us. That powerful sense of God making god’s home among us undergirds the whole of scripture. The dwelling place of God really is among mortals. That means God lives deep in the human condition in all its darkness and limit and fear - and we see it again here in Matthew’s gospel, where he makes his home in Capernaum.

And in his withdrawing, and his home making, something else happens too. Matthew points us to the prophecy from Isaiah, locating the vision of light in the darkness to the exact place where Jesus is. For the people who have been sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, light has dawned. Light that changes everything, that shifts the shadows and reveals the path – and shows that there is a path. In the person of Jesus, light makes its home in the darkness. It’s where Jesus chooses to dwell.

It’s not a new idea, the dwelling of light in the dark. Psalm 27 points us to the same thing. One of the wonderful things about psalms is that they are so old. Tried and tested pieces of faith. I love that sense that in reading the psalms we pick up the same tools that Jesus did. For me in chaplaincy, psalms are so often where we go with patients when we are looking for words and prayers that will work in their particular darknesses. And this one is about light and about home-making, ours and God’s. The one thing the psalmist asks, the one prayer amidst all the fear and turmoil is about home: it’s there in verse four: this is my one request, that I will dwell in the house of the lord for ever.

Where God dwells, let me be there. It’s actually both immensely reassuring and immensely challenging at the same time: I want to be where god is, to dwell where God dwells ...... but we know that where God chooses to dwell is in those places of human darkness and fear, amidst people who we might not immediately choose to be with. Making our home in God is not about protection from all the turmoil and fear, not about avoiding it - it’s about going right into the midst of it, but with God. If you follow the path of Jesus through the gospels, you will see where he goes. But it means that there is nothing that can happen, not even a new American president, not even a horrible diagnosis, and nowhere we can go, where God is not. Light shines in the darkness and changes it. Sometimes, through God’s great grace, that light is us, for we too are called to shine in the darkness. Those women marching all over the world yesterday, they did something that tilts the telling of the story about America – something else is happening, and fear is not the only thing. We don’t need to fear (but we will, and God knows we will) because God, not our politics, and not our health, not the weather, is the stronghold of our lives, our light, and our salvation, in whose dwelling we are invited to pitch our tent.

I met a man the other day who was in the process of being overcome by fear, having just received some terrifying news about his health, and not knowing what could be done about it. A big, strong man, he couldn’t stop the tears. I gave him a little wooden cross to hold – he clung on to it with more force than I’ve ever seen. I said, this cross is strong enough for you to hold onto. And God is big enough for all that’s going to happen, whatever it is.

The fear was still there, of course - and God was too, making his dwelling in that place of darkness.

The word became flesh, and moved into the neighbourhood of our lives, our diagnoses, our avalanches, our politics. Light dawns on those who are dwelling in the region and the shadow of death. It did back in Capernaum, and it does now.

May we, together, seek God’s face in all that happens.