[10]He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. [11]He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

John 1:10-11

2016 has been an eventful year in the world of international politics. We have seen the UK voting to leave the European Union, Donald Trump being elected as President of the United States. We have also witnessed the rise of far right groupings in France, the Netherlands, Austria.

There is a common thread of populism that runs through many of these campaigns that involved an appeal to individual and group self interest, that was built upon, and indeed fostered, a mistrust of the different, of the other, of the outsider; that argued for the erection barriers be they physical, emotional or whatever. Alongside this, we have seen an increase in hate crime as minorities, be they ethnic, religious or social have been targeted.

At this time we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Traditional images have placed the Holy Family in the warm glow of a crib, surrounded by richly robed kings, remarkably clean shepherds and well behaved animals. We lose sight of the fact that this was a young family desperately searching for accommodation, any accommodation, in which their child could be born.

As I read the familiar words of the Christmas Gospel,

> [10]He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. [11]He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

I am reminded that Jesus spent much of his life on the outside. He was one on the road, the Son of Man who had nowhere to lay his head. In a world powered by self interest, he taught his followers to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, not as gestures of a weak subservience but as active proclamation of Gospel values.

Earlier this week, as locals and visitors thronged the Christmas markets in Berlin, in an act designed to foster fear and suspicion, a lorry was driven into a crowd. I was particularly struck by one crowd of locals and migrants that gathered shortly afterwards under the banner 'You shall not divide us'. Berlin is a city that still bears the scars of a wall that divided it for decades; that divided families, at which many perished. In this same city you find large monuments and simple brass plaques in the street marking the homes of Jews who perished in the camps, all recalling a dark period in its history. All reminders of a time when populism, the fear of the outsider, of the different dragged a nation into one of the darkest periods in its history.

In this city of Berlin people stood up and declared 'You shall not divide us.' That reminds me that the Christ whose birth we celebrate today was one who reached across barriers that would divide in his own day, who, much to the horror of the religious establishment, dined with sinners and tax collectors, who touched the leper, who allowed the sinful woman to wash his feet with her tears and declared 'Your sins are forgiven'.

The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians, writing after Jesus' death and resurrection tells his readers, both Jew and Gentile:

[13] But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [14] For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. *Eph 2:13-14*

May we, who celebrate the birth of Jesus this day, show forth our worship not only with our lips but in hearts and lives that reach out to those on the edge; that we may play our part in seeking to reach out across barriers of class, of creed, of race, of difference of any kind that others, building on fears, on ignorance and suspicions, would seek to foster.

In the words of the blessing for Christmas Day

Christ, who by his incarnation gathered into one all things, earthly and heavenly, fill you with his joy and peace.