What, would you say, makes for a really good party? Is it the setting and ambience of the room? The quality of the food and the drink? The music that’s played? Or the clothes that are worn?

All these things matter. But they’re not, of course, the ultimate factor. What matters most is who comes, who’s there. You can be in the swankiest hotel ball room on Park Lane. But if the people around you are miserable and contentious, it won’t be a good night out. In contrast the right group of people stood in a bus shelter equipped only with a box of Quality Street and an i-tunes shuffle can have a grand old time. And the best parties? They happen when we bring together just the right mix of the old and the new, people with whom we’re familiar and people we’ve never met, those who surprise and stimulate us and those who enable us to feel deeply at home.

Well welcome tonight to Jesus’s birthday party. We’re so delighted that you are here. I wonder what has drawn you to this gathering? The settings not bad – if you like a bit of perpendicular. Later we shall be sharing the most precious food and drink that exists. The music is of a pretty high standard. And some of us are absolutely blinged up to the nines.

But of course what matters most is you. You may have been coming here for years. Or perhaps this is the first time you’ve stepped into this space. You might be someone who’s followed Jesus all their life. Or you could be someone who’s of no faith at all or who follows one of the world’s other religions. You may be young, or very old, male or female or undefined by any of the categories with which humans so often choose to describe ourselves. You might have been dragged here by family or friends. Or maybe this is an occasion that you’ve been determined to get to no matter what. Here we are, all wonderfully different with a host of reasons and causes to be present. And we’re so glad you’ve come. So that together we can be connected in this time and space.

We’re not the first group of people to have been drawn together by Jesus’s birth. The celebration of Jesus’s arrival in the world seems to have been able to draw together people of all sorts from day one. Think about all the characters who get dragged into the nativity story; a carpenter from up North and his teenage bride. A local inn keeper who takes pity on them. Then there’s the arrival of some local shepherds – not exactly drawn from the top drawer of the social pecking order. These gents encounter messengers who are truly out of this world, beings drawn to put on a light and sound show unlike any other that there’s ever been. As if this isn’t exotic enough, the whole thing is capped off by the arrival of visitors from the East – different, unknown, alien. With a set of differences easily the equivalent of all of us gathered here, all these people are drawn into the story of Jesus’s birth. It’s quite the party. Quite the gathering.

But not a party, a gathering that should surprise us. For if we listen to the words of John’s Gospel that were read to us earlier, these speak of our encountering in the Jesus whose birth we celebrate tonight, the God who is always about bringing people and places and everything that is into connection. In the beginning was the Word says John. John’s phrase might be better translated ‘In the beginning was connection’. Christians believe that the God who is at the very heart of everything is connection, a society of three persons – father, son and holy spirit. We believe that out of the connection that is God comes light, life and all that is – poured out for us in Jesus’s birth in the stable.

So when this God is born as a human being in Bethlehem it’s not surprising that his arrival is accompanied instantly by connection breaking out all around him – of Mary and Joseph, innkeeper and shepherds, angels and magi – all brought into the story of Jesus. We are invited to join in that same connection as we gather here tonight as we gather to remember Jesus’s birth.

This not just about our heads. It’s about our hearts as well. Let me explain. One of the things that draws people of all sorts to church at Christmas is to sing carols. To sing these songs, unlike almost any other form of singing, you don’t need to have any musical ability at all to feel able to take part. We just go for it. What’s going on that we are all here, to be together and to raise our voices – of whatever quality -together tonight? Surely it’s that as people made to be God’s children we have a homing instinct for the connection, the communion of the one who created us. It’s at Christmas that we experience that signal strongest, feel most drawn to its light.

For the invitation of our connection here this evening is to be enlightened. We live in a world of division, conflict, strife. Yet we know that’s not what our lives are supposed to be about. Darkness is to fancy ourselves to be unconnected. To imagine that we can do without those that we’re all too ready to label as the other in whom we have no part, in whom we see only weakness or danger or threat. To experience light is to see clearly that we are all connected in this together – just as was the extraordinary cast of characters that gathered together at that first Christmas in Bethlehem.

So welcome to this place. Whoever you are and from wherever you’ve come. Of all shapes and all sizes. Lifting our voices as one. Celebrating the birth of the one who is connection. Longing for a different world where we can be, as the angels sing, at unity, at peace. May the light, life and joy of Jesus shine within you this night, this Christmas and always. Welcome to the party! Amen.