

## Midnight Christmas 2019

Many, many, years ago, when I was about 15, my family and I were sitting, in the lounge, probably drinking tea and chatting. Families did more of that then. When, quite suddenly, a friend of one of my younger brothers, who was often with us, put his long legs out and his hands behind his head, and then declared, completely out of the blue, 'My mum says it's love that makes the world go round'.

You can imagine jaws dropping but I've never forgotten those words and they're so true aren't they?

And the Christmas story is a true love story. A love story, which you may have seen, acted out recently, in a school or in a church. Ours was wonderful, perfect it wasn't but it was a great joy. Afterwards, there are often amusing stories to tell.

The little boy, playing the innkeeper, who, at the right moment said, 'No room at the inn'. Perfect. Then obviously concerned, he added, 'But you can have my room if you like'. It caused much amusement.

Then there was the teacher, who asked the children, to look at the doll and imagine it really was the baby Jesus. And then tell her, what people usually say, when they see a little baby for the first time. So one child looked at the baby, turned to the audience and said loudly, 'He's just like his Dad'.

But, of course he was so right. When asked by Philip about God, Jesus replied, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father'. St. Paul also wrote that Jesus is the image of God and so, when we come to know Jesus, through the gospel stories and the other writings in the New Testament, we learn what God is like.

And that's mind-blowing. The all powerful Creator of the world, with its dazzling array of creation, took the risk of becoming human, and being born to a Jewish teenager, to show us exactly how much God loves us. A tremendous risk but what a gift. A story of true love.

But why should God love us at all? Especially after the way we have neglected him or denied him, and the way we have treated his wonderful creation. It's because he created us and he loves us.

Those of you, who are fortunate enough to be parents, will remember that overwhelming feeling of love, when you held your new born baby in your arms. It turned my world upside down. Sadly, as our children grow up, they may stay close to us, loving us, or they may not.

And it's the same for God. He gave us free will, and many have chosen to ignore him, deny him and go their own sweet way. And the whole story, throughout the Bible, is an amazing one, of God's efforts to win us back, to that first loving relationship he had, with us, the people he'd created.

It tells us how he chose one people, the Jews, to learn that there is one God for the whole earth, who loves each one of us, and that he wants us to love him and one another. But sadly, they didn't take a lot of notice.

He sent them prophets, to warn them of the cost of turning away from him. Mostly, these great prophets were ignored. And God knew that his people would continue to turn away but he always had a plan. A plan to reconcile us to him. A plan to re-open the door to heaven. A plan to restore our loving relationship with him. Jesus' birth fulfilled that plan.

God came down to earth himself, to show us exactly what divine love looks like, and how we can model our lives on him. How amazing is that?

And I quote, 'The maker of the stars and sky, became a child on earth, for you and me.'

It's important to remember too, that Jesus was born into a harsh and threatening world, into an impoverished state under foreign occupation. One governed by a corrupt and cruel ruler, with religious leaders, who were far more concerned about safeguarding their own position than in guiding the people. Born into a land troubled by frequent rebellions, brutally put down, where thieves and bandits roamed the open roads. It was an environment of danger and cruelty, a violent world.

And this child, with Mary and Joseph, would soon become a refugee, fleeing to Egypt, from Herod's jealous anger.

Does this all sound very familiar? What's new today?

When we hear of the atrocities which go on in our world, the corruption, the conflicts, the violence against minority groups and so much more. It can feel as if nothing has changed and we can often wonder, what God has to say about it. But it's the wrong question. God doesn't say anything - he acts.

Because of his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus could say, 'I am with you always, to the end of time'. He is here with us tonight. But not only here, he works with us every day. He is there, with those who are in pain or suffer in any way, with those in distress or despair. With those who love and care for the less fortunate, in this country or far from home.

If we ask for his guidance or call out in despair, he will be there for us and most importantly, if we say sorry for anything we say or do, which saddens him, just like a loving human parent, we will know ourselves to be forgiven.

So however bad the situation is, God is here with us.

Emmanuel, God with us, working actively to heal and to rescue. And what's more, he calls us to work with him, for the renewing of his creation and the fulfilment of his Kingdom of peace and justice. That's what began in Bethlehem, when Love came down at Christmas time and is still going on.

Like many of us, my son and daughter-in-law have one of those signs, in the kitchen, over their aga. Sheree is a great fan of Winnie the Pooh.

This one reads, 'Piglet asks, Pooh how do you spell love?

Pooh replied, you don't spell it, you feel it.'

I pray that you will all feel God's love surrounding you, and those you love, this Christmas and always. Amen.