

All ready for Christmas? We've finally got our Christmas tree up – and as always, no matter how carefully we put the lights away, they always come out tangled (show) – what a mess, you think you've got one bit sorted, and the knot gets tighter. I wonder about just throwing them on the tree like this – that'll be good enough, won't it?

Christmas is a time for joy; joy in the reindeer antlers, Christmas jumper, stocking full of presents, or the glass of mulled wine and mince pie – and maybe even hearing Cliff's mistletoe and wine once again – or maybe that's just me!

I wonder what your favourite Christmas memory is – one of mine is coming out of church as a child on Christmas eve, having sung carols, and being sure I saw Santa. Christmas is a wonderful time for joy...and yet...

Here we are once again... at least we're in church this year, unlike last year's Christmas lockdown. Haven't the last two years been a mess for nearly every human on the planet due to COVID-19?

What's your favourite Christmas film? I really love Paddington 2 – Paddington is a tiny, orphaned bear cub in darkest Peru, floating down the Amazon. Dangers lurk, and it's bit like the situation we find ourselves in as we approach the end of 2021 with the questions of where, how, and what still lurking in our minds, if we're honest! A long time before Jesus, the person who penned our first reading, looking at the mess around him, cried out to God 'O that you would rend the heavens and come down. He knew that only God coming down from the distant confines of heaven could sort out the mess. Yet he knew that was impossible. The bubble of this world is sealed and couldn't be broken.

Yet we've heard in our readings this evening that at the first Christmas God burst the bubble, broke the seal, and came down to earth.

But what happened – the first Christmas was, like my tree lights, a right mess. Now, I don't mean the messiness of every human birth, although I'm sure the versions we see on Christmas cards of Jesus' birth hide the messiness of the event. And the mess wasn't just the manger. There was the social mess; Mary and Joseph pledged to be married, but Mary pregnant and Joseph knowing he wasn't the father. This could have meant betrayal and humiliation, until the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream; and to cap it all there was the political mess. Rome demanded taxes, and taxes needed them to know who was who, which led to social upheaval and a long journey. Jesus, you see, was no stranger to the mess we face today. He was born into a right mess.

And so back to Paddington. He's about to disappear over the top of the waterfall. Where is his rescue going to come from? Spoiler alert – his elderly aunt Lucy bungee jumps and with perfect precision, upside down with outstretched arms plucks the little bear cub from the log, just as the log plummets into the cavern below.

Christmas is more than mess – cringe alert – there is also the mess-iah – the deliverer, rescuer, liberator. Like Aunt Lucy the Messiah didn't tear open the heavens and come down, but came as a baby. As Betjeman's poem says 'and is it true, this most tremendous tale of

all, seen in a stained glass window's hue, a baby in an ox's stall? The maker of the stars and sea, became a child for you and me?' It's a bit like your landlord becoming your lodger, or Beatrix potter becoming peter rabbit! The creator becomes part of his creation. That's what we heard the angels saying to the shepherds; these ordinary people who heard the truth of Christmas first. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to **you**. Like us, the shepherds were longing for someone to sort out the mess; and this help came not from Caesar augustus, the roman ruler, but from the baby in the manger. No wonder the angel said this was good news of great joy. This baby is God's Christmas present to his world, to you and me. Yes, for you and me. Not just for religious people or for good people or for those who were brought up as Christians. Listen again to the angel's message – This baby is going to be great news **for all the people**, for the religious and the irreligious, the good and the bad, the healthy and the sick, the capable and the incapable, those with many regrets and those with few.

All ready for Christmas? No, I don't mean is the tree decorated, or the presents bought, Covid has shown us that those preparations can easily be disrupted and we get disappointed all over again like last year, but you and me recognising the baby as the saviour?

While elements of our Christmas celebrations sometimes turn out worse than our expectations, the actual real truth of Christmas is always far, far better than expected. You might not see much similarity between yourself and a bunch of shepherds looking after a flock of sheep on a Bethlehem hillside some 2000 years ago. But there is one thing we all have in common with them. Is this message of Christmas true? Is the baby in the manger really the messiah come to rescue us from our mess?

After the angels left them, we're told that 'the shepherds said to one another 'let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened' They had a choice to ignore the angels message, or to do something about it. And they discovered in the baby in the manger, in a stable round the back of a pub, in Bethlhem, under a starry sky. 2000 years ago that God had really come down to earth.

One of my favourite presents a few years ago were some noise cancelling headphones. They are amazing, not just the quality sound of the music, but because at the press of a button, with noise cancelling on, the world around goes silent. Nothing gets through. My own little world is undisturbed. And we so easily do that in our own lives. We don't let God disturb us, challenge us or change us. We don't let him in. Maybe we hear the message of Christmas now ,but we put our headphones back on without letting the claims of Jesus the messiah disturb us, and so we miss the song of the angels, and miss out on a relationship with God in Jesus that fills lives with love, joy, hope and peace.

Here's a prayer you might like to make your own.

Dear Jesus,

Thank you that you tore open the heavens and came down to earth that first Christmas. Thank you for coming as the messiah to rescue me from the mess. I am sorry for my part in the mess of the world; living a life focused on me, rather than you or others. Please forgive

me. Thank you that you died on the cross to pay the price for my mess, and showed by rising to new life again that this life is not all there is, and that I can know the promise of heaven.

Thank you that the message of Christmas is good news of great joy for all people – and that means me!

Jesus, I open my heart to you. Please come into my life as my messiah so that I might know your pardon for the past, your presence in the present, and your paradise in the future.

Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, please drop me an email so I can pray for you and help you continue with Jesus as your messiah.

I've still got to sort out these Christmas lights, though!