

The Heart of Christmas

Jane Godley – Reader at St. Swithun's

13th December 2020

I wonder how you're going to be celebrating Christmas this year. Will it be together with two other households, or will you be like us, celebrating on your own, without family or cuddles of grandchildren? Can it be a proper Christmas without the presence of loved ones, without turkey and mince pies? Can we celebrate without a Christmas tree and decorations?

For most people it's going to be a Christmas like no other: for the recently bereaved; those who have lost their jobs; those fearful of losing their homes; those whose families have been split by Covid-19. Christmas will be different. Can we celebrate when there's been so much anxiety and suffering? Have we anything to celebrate?

When we go back to that first Christmas we see what Christmas is about. A heavily pregnant young girl making a journey of 120 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, walking, or riding very uncomfortably on a donkey. She wasn't alone but with the man she was engaged to marry. Not the father of the child she was carrying. Indeed, when he learned that she was pregnant, he was going to break off the engagement and why didn't he?

Well, he was warned in a dream not to be afraid to marry the girl, for the baby was to fulfil an ancient prophecy. The child was to be the answer to the dreams of all people. A prophecy made hundreds of years ago, made by Isaiah, showing that God is in control, that God has the master plan. The Jewish nation was told to expect a saviour and the people saw this as the tyrannical power of the Romans would come to an end and that there would be a life of wealth and plenty for all. Well wouldn't you, if you'd been told to expect a saviour.

They hadn't expected that it would be a baby, born to a humble village girl engaged to a carpenter and yet this baby was to be a bridge between God and his people. The baby named Jesus was to change the world and over two thousand years later we still celebrate his coming among us, part of God but part of us too, human yet divine. He came to save us from ourselves. Jesus came to show us the way to peace, contentment and fulfilment. Peace that the world cannot give, the gift of God was to have real life.

It wasn't an attractive place to be born in, a stable, dark, smelly, not very hygienic, and Matthew goes on to tell us the baby was laid in a manger, an animals' feeding trough. Surely not! It's not a bit like the colourful pristine nativity that our Christmas cards show. We know that Mary and Joseph were among the poor and yet they were the ones chose by God to bring his message of hope into the world. To be the link, the bridge, between God and all his people. And why did God choose the poor to bring the light into the world? I think it was God showing his compassion, his love for those who live simple lives without the trappings of luxury or affluence. For God is a God of all people, he accepts us just as we are. God could have sent Jesus as a powerful ruler, capable of imposing his will on the whole world, dictating how we should live. But God chose another way. God gave us the freedom to choose how we should live and in giving us Jesus God shows us how to live. And in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, 'Live simply so that others may simply live.'

Francis of Assisi was the first person to arrange a Nativity so that people could see the simplicity, the human humility of God's greatest gift. He arranged a live Nativity scene, a message of hope for all people. The present pope, Francis, wanted to live up to the challenge of his namesake. He immediately chose to dispense with the fancy garments, the custom-made red shoes, and perhaps more notably, he chose to lie in a modest room in the Vatican guest house rather than in the pope's palace. After all, in St. Francis, he was the one who set out to rebuild and reform the church by following the life and example of the poor man, Jesus, who turned his back on wealth and power had no home. He travelled the countryside preaching the gospel, healing the sick and St. Francis famously said, 'Preach the Gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.' He reached out to members of other religions. He lived among the lepers and treated women with dignity and respect. He cherished the earth and all its creatures. He rejected the trappings of wealth and power.

Christmas then is a celebration of God's greatest gift to each one of us; Jesus, who showed us how to live, to have that peace and inner contentment that so often missing in our lives. For most of us Covid-19 has meant a different lifestyle. Less socialising, fewer meetings, far less shopping. We haven't used the car so much, we've got out and walked more. It brings us peace and restoration. In the awful bush fires in Australia those lands are recovering. It was noticeable here that the air became cleaner with less traffic. We know how we can care and help the natural world which is so important to our wellbeing and interdependence of every living creature shows us that we need each other.

We were not created to live alone, but to help and care for each other, an outpouring of love for those around us, an appreciation of the skills and bravery of medical staff and carers in residential homes. We've appreciated the faithfulness of the posties, of delivery drivers, of those working in our shops, all serving, knowing that they were at risk of catching and spreading the virus to their families. And just as the virus has rejuvenated our appreciation of the natural world we too can be renewed by realising that the happiest Christmases will be ones of simplicity, generosity and reaching out to others.

For many this could have been a miserable time of year, made worse by seeing others, knowing that they have all the trappings of celebration: the luxury foods; the drinks; the ability to give wonderful presents to their children. But these can be replaced by the simple pleasures of memories, appreciation of the love and support of families and friends. The joys of the natural world. Watching the birds feeding, noticing the green tips of bulbs appearing in the earth, a thanksgiving for life itself, for moments of unexpected, surprising joy.

If we continually give thanks in our lives we have no room for feelings of anger, frustration disappointment, envy, and by giving of ourselves whether in time or in gift or prayer we can bring the love and compassion of God's gift to all people.

This is the third Sunday of Advent and we remember John the Baptist, a man that was so different to the norm. He lived simply, he wore clothes of camel hair and lived on locusts and honey. And John was the one that prepared the way for the coming of Christ, who preached repentance, the turning away from the life they were living and turning to God.

John was a brave man, he was known for shouting in the wilderness, challenging the way people lived, and yet hundreds flocked to him to be baptised in the river Jordan. He criticised the Tetrarch Herod for marrying his brother's wife and that resulted in John's beheading. Just as John prepared the way for Christ and his ministry on earth we too prepare ourselves afresh for the coming of Christ in our lives. Mary and Joseph faced an uncertain, very bleak future. Joseph was warned in a dream not to return home but to journey to a foreign county, without work, prospects, without the support of families or friends. What got him through this time of uncertainty? Just their faith, the knowledge of God's presence guiding them in the trust that God has the master plan, that God is so much more powerful, loving, compassionate than we can ever imagine.

For many people this won't be a time of frenzied activity. There'll be fewer preparation, no midnight service, no cooking for the whole extended family. And so there might be more time to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas when we are reminded once more of God's greatest gift to us - Jesus Christ, and so let us celebrate.

Wishing you Peace and His Presence. Jane Godley