

Dear Friend,

It is the week before the fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Day is only ten days away. Apart from dates in the diary, nothing has yet been done to prepare for our Christmas celebrations. To be honest, it has been hard to concentrate on anything recently as Jane's Mother died on 2nd November and we gave thanks for her life in Jersey on 30th November and on 11th December in Marlborough for the English family who were unable to get to the Channel Islands. Jane's Mother had a heart attack on 14th September and sadly, she never recovered. Whilst she was in hospital, Jane and me, and her brother and his wife took it in turns to be with her. During the time that Jane's Mother was ill, Jane's Uncle and my two Uncles also died and I was privileged to conduct their services in Hartland and Topsham in Devon.

This is not the best and most cheerful start to a Christmas letter, but this is where we are. It is into sad and messy situations that Jesus comes. He was born into a real and struggling world, where people knew grief, sadness, hard work, and injustice along with its joys, friendships, job satisfaction and comforts. Jesus came into a society which feasted, danced, sang, partied and enjoyed life, as well as one which wept, mourned, and struggled to get by with foreign rulers and corrupt kings.

On the day before Jane's Mother died, we spent the morning listening to Handel's "Messiah". She had sung alto with the Jersey Festival choir for over forty years and so knew "The Messiah" very well. The words "Comfort, ye my people" spoke very powerfully to us, as did "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light". Jane's Mother could not speak by then, but when we reached the "Hallelujah chorus", Jane said, "Here comes the altos starring moment!" Then, as "hallelujah" echoed round the hospital room, Mother mouthed "hallelujah!" Had we imagined it? No, as she did it again! The power of music and the power of the words of Scripture. "I know that my Redeemer liveth" got very emotional.

If you haven't stopped reading, you are forgiven for thinking "this is dreary and gloomy," or "this isn't very Christmassy! He really has lost the plot" However, this is the reality of Christmas, that Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth to live amongst us, because he loved us so much. Thanks to the life, death and resurrection, which began that first Christmas in Bethlehem, we no longer need fear death. Death is not the end, but part of the journey of eternal life, opening the door to the new creation, bringing us ever closer into the presence of God.

This Christmas there will be empty chairs at all our families' Christmas tables, as eight family members have died over the past fourteen months. I am sure

there will be quiet moments, sad moments and possibly a few tears, especially when we get to the descant in "O Come all ye faithful" on Christmas morning without Mother singing the alto part. I do know that we will be singing with gusto, the words of Charles Wesley's wonderful carol:-

" Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
risen with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
born that man no more may die,
born to raise the sons of earth,
born to give them second birth.
*Hark! The herald angels sing,
glory to the new-born King!"*

It is thanks to God and the first Christmas that even in grief, we can feel joy, knowing that Jesus brings us eternal life. It is easy to forget the incredible fact that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. He is with us in our darkest and brightest hours. He is with us now and one day will raise us, daughters and "sons of earth" to new life with him, giving us "second birth". God's gift is his Son and this is his gift to us. The wonderful thing is that eternal life does not depend on doctrine or passing a Scripture examination, but comes from a relationship with Jesus, the baby in the manger, who grew to become a man and lived amongst us, died and rose

again, before returning to heaven, where he is ready to welcome us home.

As the Omicron variant of the Covid 19 virus begins to spread, I hope that you keep safe and are able to celebrate Christmas with your loved ones, sharing presents, meals and festive joy. Whatever your situation, the greatest gift of all is knowing that Jesus became one of us to be with us in all that life brings along. May our Lord Jesus be born again in all our hearts this Christmastide. He is our hope and we can trust in him as we go into 2022.

Jane joins me in wishing you a very happy and peaceful Christmas.

May God bless you richly this Christmas with his love, joy and peace.

Stephen