

Over the past four Sundays Jon, Jane and I have led you through the season of Advent where we have been challenged to think about the very imperfect humans in Jesus' family tree; how John the Baptist challenges us even today to repent so that we can be ready for the promised new world and to follow Mary's example who said "yes" to the challenge of being the mother of Jesus Christ.

A different sort of challenge was set for our four year old grandson Adam and his younger sister Sophie who will be two next week, by his parents during Advent – to learn the Lord's prayer – although truth be told Sophie was challenged to be patient whilst Adam learnt to recite the prayer as her vocabulary is still very limited – choc choc and now not quite fitting into the prayer.

Each afternoon the four of them would get together around a lit candle to open their four Advent Calendar windows for that day – but no one was allowed to open the window and take the hidden chocolate until Adam was able to recite some part of the prayer.

On Christmas Eve, much to Jane's delight, she was present when they opened the last window and Adam was word perfect. And even little Sophie said Amen at the appropriate time. Chocolates were duly enjoyed by all and a spare choc was even found for Grandma.

I have been challenged in different ways; how not to keep saying bah humbug during our two Christingles on Christmas Eve afternoon – although to put that statement into context all of us who were helping wore a variety of Christmas hats, and mine just happened to have the words 'bah humbug' on it.

I was also challenged by staying awake for our midnight communion; it started a full ninety minutes later than my usual bed time.

But the biggest challenge for me this year, indeed as it has been for a number of years, is the growing trend for many people of excluding Christ from Christmas; where the reason for the season is to get out and BUY! For many, Christmas begins with Black Friday and ends when the last gifts are bought on the 24th.

This is the type of Christmas when Jesus is rarely mentioned; indeed some prefer to wish each other 'happy holidays' or 'seasons greetings' instead of using the word Christmas – the celebration of Christ's birth.

But the giving of presents is part and parcel – pun intended – of celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ in that stable nearly two thousand years ago. And those of you present on Christmas morning would have heard Jon's daughter, Anna speak eloquently and passionately about how, like the three wise men, the giving of carefully chosen gifts is an integral part of the Christmas story.

But Christmas is more than the giving and receiving of presents as our Gospel story revealed. Think about the shepherds.

There they were, quietly minding their own business on the hillside when not only just one angel suddenly appears to tell them about the good news of Jesus' birth but also a multitude of angels appear and start singing and praising God.

So they decide to go hastily to see the truth of what the angel had told them. They go spontaneously; they do not even stop at Lydl - O Lydl store in Bethlehem – they just arrive and tell Mary and Joseph what they had heard.

Do you think Mary and Joseph were upset because they hadn't brought gifts? Of course not – they were amazed at what the shepherds told them. Not only that, but our reading says they return a second time 'glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen' – not bearing gifts.

Because to them, the most important thing about the events that were unfolding was that small babe who became known as Jesus Christ.

You will all have heard the quip that if you take Christ out of Christmas all you are left with is M & S. Well, the flip side of the same coin is that if you take M & S out of Christmas all you're left with is Christ.

Christ, who was and is and is to come is the gift freely given to us and our challenge is how best to respond to that gift. How can we ensure that Christ is never taken out of Christmas?

Well firstly, by remembering that Christ is not only with us on Christmas Day but also every day throughout the year.

When we seek to live out our lives according to the amazing humility and love that Jesus showed; when we show compassion to the marginalized of our time just as Jesus showed compassion to the marginalized of his time.

If you are in any doubt about the validity of that statement just ask Karen to tell you the story of how we here at Holy Trinity have shown love and compassion to the frightened women in The Sanctuary or Rosemary the story of how poor and struggling families in our community have been helped throughout this year by Food bank.

By word and deed we have the opportunity to reflect Christ's presence in the lives of others; to show that being generous is not exclusive to Christmas but an integral part of the good news of Jesus Christ 365 days a year.

The shepherds met Jesus and they were changed forever. OK, they may have gone back to their sheep, but as they did so they told every one they met what they had heard, what they had seen. They had an experience and they shared it with everybody. And that is what we can do to not only retain Christ in Christmas but also to make it clear throughout the year that Christ is more than just Christmas.

You will all have seen the Christmas adverts from the major retailers....but to close here is a different advert.....

The advert isn't about buying costly presents, but instead celebrates the ultimate gift – the birth of Jesus Christ.