

Carol Service 2022

I sometimes ask people what they are most looking forward to about Christmas. And one of the responses is often “for it to be all over!”. I think I know what they mean!

Christmas for many of us is a time when the normal rhythm of life is suspended. The things we do, the way we spend our time, the food we eat and the company we keep are all different. It begins early in December when normally house proud people start festooning their homes with illuminated reindeer and inflatable snowmen; when our smartly decorated living rooms are disrupted with trees and tinsel and streamers and cards; when queues start forming at the Touchwood car parks as we rush to the shops to buy gifts we can't afford for people we don't like very much who probably won't want them anyway.

We do things at Christmas that we simply don't do at other times of the year – like watching our children or grandchildren dress up as shepherds or wise men in nativity plays, while singing Away in a manger, like coming out to church in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve, like listening to a story of events that took place 2000 years ago in a small town far away in Israel.

And it will reach its climax next week, next Sunday - when for most of us all routine is put to one side. It will last for several days – maybe even a week or more. A constant round of visits and visitors, of family and friends, of overeating and under exercising; of drinking too much and dozing too much, of parties and presents; of endless games of charades or cards. And all sorts of other traditions and activities that are an integral part of the way your family spend Christmas. And of course each family has its own traditions

And I suspect many of us are pleased in the end to get back to normal. To slip back into the old and familiar routine. Where we know where we are, we know what day it is and we know what needs to be done. Where we are comfortable.

And I suspect too that come early January when the food is all eaten, the empty bottles taken away for recycling, the decorations put back in the attic and the guests have gone home to leave us in peace - Christmas will disappear into the distant past and what we did over those few days will turn out to have virtually no effect on how we live our lives through the rest of the year..

Which is sad. In fact more than sad.

Because the whole point of Christmas is that it does change everything.

For Mary and Joseph – their lives were turned upside down never to be the same again. Not just by the birth of a baby, but because it was **this** baby. The one who grew up as God’s son, to teach us and show us by his example how we are to live, and to die on the cross. The one that brought them joy, heartbreak and challenge.

For the shepherds, the memory of that night on the hillside – ordinary people given an extraordinary vision of angels. That moment, the brightness of the light, the music of the angels’ song and the sight of the babe in the manger changed their lives for ever – bringing an assurance that God was concerned for everyone – even shepherds, even everyday working people.

For the wise men. The journey full of hope and expectation, the encounter with Herod, the following of the star to the stable and the presentation of their gifts as they worshipped Jesus changed their lives for ever. The one that they had discovered after their journey was the new king from God.

And for those who came into contact with this babe from the manger as he grew up. To those who heard his teaching, who were healed by his power, who were inspired by his authority, who responded to his call to live a different kind of life – a life in pursuit of peace and justice, a life governed by love – to all those people, their lives were never the same again as they were given a new hope.

For the disciples who left their homes and livelihoods to follow him; who were closest to him as he taught and as he journeyed; who accompanied him all the way to the cross; who met with him after his resurrection, who carried his message of hope and love out into the world, who risked their lives and for some, sacrificed their lives, everything changed as they were given a new purpose.

For those who had never met with Jesus themselves, but who heard about him from those who had. Who saw the evidence of changed lives and new purpose and new hope, who wanted that for themselves and took the step of faith and found that, even though this Jesus had lived many years before, they were still able to meet with him and pray to him; still able to know his presence in their lives, still able to allow their lives to be changed for ever by him in new found joy.

For countless millions of people through the last 2000 years who have heard of this Jesus and have followed him. Those who have been inspired by him to change the world; to show love to those around them, to work for justice and peace, to strive for a better place to live. Whose lives have been changed and enriched and who wanted others’ lives to change.

For those in this nation and across the world who followed him and in his name worked to bring healing and education and care and protection to those around them – to stranger as well as friend, to those who had little as well as those who had much; who dedicated their lives to serve him in some of the toughest places on earth; who stopped at nothing to share the love they had experienced. Their lives changed for ever.

For the people who founded and built this church; for the thousands who have worshipped Jesus here over almost 200 years; for the people who have followed Jesus in this place – their lives changed for ever.

For the people here in this parish this year who have come to know this same Jesus.. Whose lives has been changed for the better to give hope and direction and purpose. Changed by the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem and whose birth we are celebrating tonight and who still lives in people's hearts today

This baby who called himself the Light of the World. God himself becoming human to live alongside us, to guide us into the light and help us live in the light. The one who – as in the reading we have just had read – shines in the darkness of this world. The one who the darkness cannot overcome.

The Christmas festivities may soon fade into the past; the Christmas gifts may sit unused and unopened on the shelf; the Christmas decorations may gather dust in the attic; the Christmas guests may soon be home; the house may soon be returned to its quiet and orderly norm. But this year; this Christmas; don't let the baby Jesus stay in the manger.

This year, this Christmas, why not give him the chance to change your life. Why not open the door to him this Christmas, why not begin your journey with him. It will be a journey that will bring hope and purpose and joy and challenge; it will be one you won't regret stepping out on.

I would be more than happy to share my experiences of this life changing Jesus (and I am sure others would too); to talk to you about him and how he can change your life. Just catch a word with me afterwards and you could be on the way to receiving a Christmas gift you will never forget.