

Christmas Eve 2023

Isaiah 52:7-10

Hebrews 1:1-4

John 1:1-14

I was with a group of people the other day and we were talking about Christmas and what we were most looking forward to about it. Some mentioned family visits, others the joy on children's faces as they opened their gifts and others the pleasure of singing familiar carols and hearing the nativity story. But a couple of them wittily responded "for it to be all over!". It was meant in jest, but I think I know the thoughts behind it.

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 who perhaps we're not very fond of, 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 or like coming out to church in the middle of the night to listen to a story about events that took place 2000 years ago in a small town far away in Israel.

The Christmas festivities themselves 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 I suspect, like the people I spoke to the other day, many of us are pleased in the end to get back to 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 and the needleless tree are taken away for recycling, the decorations put back in the attic and the guests 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 changes 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 would grow up as God's son, to teach us and show us by his example how we are to live; the one who would eventually die on the cross. The one that would bring them joy, heartbreak, sorrow 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 baby 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. They recognised that God had acted in a new and wonderful way; they knew that the baby they had sought out and found would be the new king from God.

And for those who came into contact with this baby from the manger as he grew up. 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 across the world through the last 2000 years who have heard of this Jesus and have followed him and in his name have 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 have dedicated their lives to serve him in some of the toughest places on earth; who have 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 many many people who have followed Jesus in this place – their lives changed for ever by their encounter with him.

For the people in this parish this year who have come to know this same Jesus. Whose lives have been given new purpose and new direction. For those and others whose lives have been changed for the better to give hope and joy. Changed by the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem and whose birth we are celebrating tonight.

Changed by Jesus who called himself the Light of the World. God himself becoming human to live alongside us, who moved into the neighbourhood as it were, to guide us into the light and help us live in the light. The one who – as we have just heard in that reading from John's gospel – shines in the darkness of this world. The one who the darkness cannot overcome. The one who reminds us that God has not forgotten us or abandoned us; that a picture that many have of a God who created the world and then just sits back and dispassionately observes does not hold water. Because in Jesus, God himself came to live among us, to show us what being human could and should be like, to love us unconditionally and, through his act of self sacrifice show us the way back to God. In Jesus God experienced the highs and lows of life. Opposition, hatred, betrayal, suffering and ultimately death. In Jesus God was fully human – like one of us. He knows what it is like.

He knows what the darkness of this world can be like; he weeps at the suffering of those caught up in war and conflict – in Ukraine and Gaza and Israel and across the world; he cries alongside those who are forced to flee their homes and livelihoods, crossing seas in small boats unsure of the welcome they will receive or what the future might hold; he grieves with those who have lost their loved ones; he urges and inspires ordinary people like you and me to shine as lights

and make a difference in the world – to become part of the solution rather than just seeing the problems. This is the Jesus who has changed lives for 2000 years.

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 have gone 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 brings hope and purpose and joy and challenge; It will change who you are and what you do; it will help to make you into the person God has always wanted you to be; it will be a journey you will never regret stepping out on.

Richard and I will be more than happy to share with you our experiences of this life changing Jesus; to talk with you about him and how he can change your life. Just catch a word with one of us afterwards and you could be on the way to receiving a Christmas gift you will never forget.

And so I hope and pray that this year, this Christmas, an encounter with this Jesus will be life giving and life changing for you.

