

Christmas Midnight 2014 – The Holy Family

Isaiah 52 vv 7-10 p739, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1 vv 1-12 p1201, John 1 vv 1-14 p1063

Celebrating my 60th birthday this year has set me reminiscing about Christmas past, even if they do say that nostalgia isn't what it used to be. When I was a child, my focus would have been on Christmas present and perhaps too much on Christmas presents! As Christians, our Christmas celebration is certainly of Christ present and our longing is for Christmas yet to come, the eternal life which God so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son to bring to us.

But, to start with Christmas past, things used to begin to get really exciting for me from about the beginning of December. These very short days, with their dark mornings and early evenings, were somehow harbingers of the Christmas festival of light and warmth and welcome, and family and friends, and giving and sharing, of enough and of more than enough of the best things in life. I treasure a memory of, when I can only have been about seven or eight, coming home from school and getting off the bus around about 4.00 with a beautiful full moon hanging low in the sky, the only, but more than sufficient, light in the wintry dusk, because of course we didn't have street lights in the country in those days.

When I was young, before central heating was invented, we used to open our Christmas presents in bed. I pitied those more disciplined families where children had to wait for their presents until they had had breakfast or been to church or until grandma had come round for dinner. Oh and why do people now call their Christmas dinner Christmas lunch? The biggest meal of the day is always dinner at whatever time it is eaten.

Talking about Christmas past, I once asked my by then grown up nieces what had been their favourite Christmas present. They hesitated to tell me, but, when I pressed them, they admitted that it was the year they were both given music boxes in the shape of a basket of puppies. Whenever they were wound up, they played Brahms's Lullaby and there were two of them! The girls kept on winding up the music boxes to the point that they had so far wound me up that I went and sat in the garden until they promised to be quiet.

Talking about this episode led to the question what was my favourite Christmas present? The one that sticks in my mind is Christmas 1962. I was eight and I woke up to find a bike waiting for me in the hall. Someone said that it must have been one of the most influential Christmas presents I ever had, because I'm still riding a bike nearly sixty years later. I'm not still riding the same one, however, even though at the time it was a bit big for me to grow into, but a bike represents to me freedom, physical exercise in the fresh air, and, in later life, economy and protecting the environment. This is why I resist so strongly the imposition of any restrictions or regulations placed on cyclists for their own safety such as the threat of compulsory cycle helmets.

Where was I? Christmases at Betsham when I was still quite a small child. I remember members of the family gathering together in our little bungalow, singing carols and old time songs, playing games, and the Queen's speech. Would it count as high treason if I admitted that I wasn't very interested in the Queen's speech?

Christmases at Wigmore (ages nine to late teens) were legendary. The whole family used to come to our modest sized bungalow – our own immediate family, grandparents, a great uncle and great aunt, plus other relations in and out of the house – for two or three days of revelry. The cramped conditions led to the necessity of my sleeping with my father on a contraption called a put-u-up. If you don't know what one of those is, they have one on display in the Tower of London – in the torture chamber. Apart from that, from the very special Midnight Mass or a quiet 8.00 Christmas Communion, through present opening and gigantic meals, to bingo and community singing, a good time was had by all. We even had a grandmother who insisted on doing all the washing up as her contribution to the festivities. Every family needs one of those.

The run up to Christmas was exciting too. At school we learnt the Christmas story and made decorations and cards. There were Christmas concerts and dramatic productions and school and church nativity plays. Like so many families, we had our box of decorations, which became precious by association as well as for what they were in themselves, and these used to go up the weekend before Christmas. The same weekend, the Christmas tree came in from the garden and was decorated, until the year we started having artificial trees and the real thing was left unmolested outside to grow into quite a large specimen, which I believe is still there at the present time. I now have three Christmas trees from three homes and they all live fully decorated in a large cupboard throughout the year. Until we stopped making them, because everyone was too full up to eat them, there were Christmas cakes to make and ice.

I used to like coming home from secondary school upstairs on a double decker bus (Bristol K6A, Guy Arab or Leyland Titan PD2 for those of you who are interested) on those dark late afternoons and seeing other people's Christmas lights and trees. There weren't many people who illuminated the outsides of their houses in those days, but Grain Road, Wigmore, was famous for its Christmas lights and I used to make a point of taking the dog that way for his evening walk.

The two or three days of Christmas used to seem a lot longer than they do now and we did lots more things as a family in the course of them. I realise that time does seem shorter as you get older, but I think it is also because so much time is spent travelling these days. People used to stay in one place for the Christmas holiday, whether in their own home or as a guest. Nowadays, hours are spent on the road as people try to fit in several different locations over the holiday period. And of course what used to be the January sales now start on Boxing Day. The only thing I can say to that is, haven't people got anything better to do with their time than shopping? If people are really desperate for something to do on 26th December, they could even come to church! St Stephen's Day is, after all, a religious festival.

And so to work and college days. I'm glad to say that I have never had to work at Christmas. There was always, however, plenty leading up to Christmas – parties, Christmas dinners, especially in that brief period in which I was in gainful employment, and Advent and Christmas Carol services. There were also choosing and buying presents and sending and receiving cards.

When I was first ordained, I was the curate at All Saints, Orpington. The vicar used to let me take the 8.00 service Christmas Day and then have a few days off. So I still celebrated most of Christmas at my parents' house. One of my pleasant memories is of my sister coming to fetch me one year in the car, a light coating of snow on the roads.

As I was responsible for all the services at St Christopher's Ramsgate when I moved there in 1984, the pattern then changed. The family came to spend Christmas with me, rather than me going to them. Dramatic memories are the year I had some illness on Boxing Day and it fell to my mother to take the dog out in a gale that demolished hangars at nearby RAF Manston. Somewhere I have a picture of her in borrowed oilskins. I don't think the dog had a long walk that Christmas. The other was Denise's first Christmas, when, at seven weeks of age, she took it into her head to develop a raging temperature which led to our spending much of the night in Margate Hospital. Fond memories.

With the exception of last year and one other year, we've had all our family Christmases at Cuxton Rectory since 1987. We've spent hours assembling children's toys, only to find they needed batteries. We've tried to ring the changes from turkey, some years having goose, and, once or twice, venison – only venison is too dear! We've established our traditions and our own personal family Christmases have of course been part of our church family Christmases at St Michael's and St John's. As I've got older, I have to admit that some years attending all the many wonderful Advent and Christmas events a clergyman gets invited to can be very exhausting and the 25th of December is apt to find me quite tired. One year in particular I remember. I was drifting slowly off to sleep around half past nine on the evening of Christmas Day and my ninety year old grandmother suddenly exclaimed, "Well this isn't much fun!"

Many more memories to share and many of us here tonight have shared many of them together. So no more reminiscences except that first year when the family did not join me at Cuxton and we arranged a Boxing Day walk for the parish. That Boxing Day was very wet and the paths up through the woods were extremely muddy. But, and this is the best bit, when we got to the Black Boy at Upper Halling, they didn't take one look at us and say, "No room at the inn." On the contrary, they took us in, dried us off and fed and watered us. This was doubly kind of them as it had been our original intention to carry on to the Plough, if the weather hadn't been so awful.

You can tell that I am very thankful for my family and friends, my church and the Christmases I have enjoyed, and an abundance of material goods, but, above all, for so much kindness and love which I have received down through the years.

Freely ye have received, freely give. We are invited to remember at Christmas those people who may not be enjoying the festival as we do. There are the bereaved, those who have lost loved ones in the last year or the last few years. They may be feeling very lonely and sad at Christmas. I cling on to two thoughts, however. The first is that our sadness in loss is very precious. We are sad because we love so much and love is itself so precious. The second is that, if we belong to Christian families, we know that we have not lost them. They dwell eternally with God, as do we, in that eternal fellowship of love, which we call the

communion of saints. That is why we can sing, *Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness. Where is death's sting? Where grave thy victory? I triumph still, if thou abide with me.* Tears there may well be, but bitter they are not, if we have faith in Christ. This is also why we can pray: *O merciful God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life; in whom whosoever believeth shall live, though he die; and whosoever liveth, and believeth in him, shall not die eternally; who also hath taught us, by his holy Apostle Saint Paul, not to be sorry, as men without hope, for them that sleep in him: We meekly beseech thee, O Father, to raise us from the death of sin unto the life of righteousness; that, when we shall depart this life, we may rest in him, as our hope is this our brother doth; and that, at the general resurrection in the last day, we may be found acceptable in thy sight; and receive that blessing, which thy well-beloved Son shall then pronounce to all that love and fear thee, saying, Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world. Grant this, we beseech thee, O merciful Father, through Jesus Christ, our Mediator and Redeemer. Amen.*

Moreover, when we speak about the joys of family life, that may be hard for people whose family life is unhappy – where family members are not kind and loving to one another. When we speak about an abundance of good food and drink, we are bound to remember that there are people who don't have enough to eat; we must not forget the homeless. When we speak of fellowship, we cannot forget that so many people are lonely. And when we speak of peace and goodwill, what about all those people who live in war zones or under oppressive regimes or in failed states, where anarchy prevails and there is no law and order? What about the victims and perpetrators of crime? And what about people who are seriously ill, disabled or in great pain? What can Christmas mean to them? Peace and goodwill to all.

We ought not to downplay the part played by human sin in the sufferings of this world. It is not true that all suffering can be directly attributed to sin and it is certainly not true that the worst sinners suffer most. People do suffer as a result of their own folly and wickedness, but many people suffer because of the sins of others. We are responsible for what we do with our lives. None of us is wholly innocent. If we are honest, we can all say, *We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not have done.* If that were not the case, how much less would be the sum total of human suffering? Think about it. *We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not have done; And there is no health in us.* People sometimes say that they wish it could be Christmas all the time – peace and goodwill throughout the year, the world infused with the Christmas spirit. But it isn't and much of the reason why it isn't Christmas all the time is down to human sin. *We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not have done; And there is no health in us.*

But thou, O Lord. God intervenes in this wicked world, God Who is love. Jesus becomes a member of a human family, the family of Mary and Joseph, the Holy Family. I don't imagine that they were rich. They certainly weren't comfortable, spending that first Christmas night having a baby in a stable. They lived under an oppressive regime, narrowly escaping a massacre. They were the subject of gossip. The family life of the Holy Family was far from easy. For a time, they were refugees in a strange land. They returned to a

mundane existence in Nazareth until, at the age of 30, Jesus embarrassed them by becoming an itinerant preacher and miracle worker. They were puzzled by His mission and troubled when so many powerful people turned against Him. Their Son was executed as worse than a common criminal. In Christ, God shares all that it is to be human. He shares our lives. He shares the life of the human family. Many people will be having a tough time this Christmas and Jesus understands because He has shared our life. He sympathises with us in all our joys and sorrows because He has shared them. He understands us when we pray through Him and our Father knows what we have need of before we ask Him.

But it is more than that. Jesus comes not merely to share our life; He comes to transform our life. *We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.* Perhaps the Christmas spirit is the Holy Spirit, the spirit of peace and goodwill to all, the spirit of abundance and joy, the spirit of life in all its fulness. Jesus comes to be born at Bethlehem, to die on the Cross at Calvary and to rise again from the dead in the garden in Jerusalem, to redeem us from sin, to set us free, to forgive us, so that we may be born again, at one with God, reconciled to God, reconciled to one another, heirs of eternal life. *He died that we might be forgiven He died to make us good, That we might go at last to heaven, saved by his precious Blood.*

There is a vast difference between the way the world ought to be and the way the world is. It is Jesus alone Who reconciles this difference. He becomes a member of our family, the human family, and He invites us to be members of His family, the holy family. The Son of God became the Son of Man in order that the children of men might become the sons and daughters of God. In Him our needs are met and in Him we meet the needs of other people. What is required of us is faith and repentance. Eternal life is God's free gift to us in Christ. Jesus joins us, therefore, and our families, in the celebration of Christmas, the unseen guest. May we know His presence in our hearts and in our homes and in everything we do this Christmas and always. Amen.