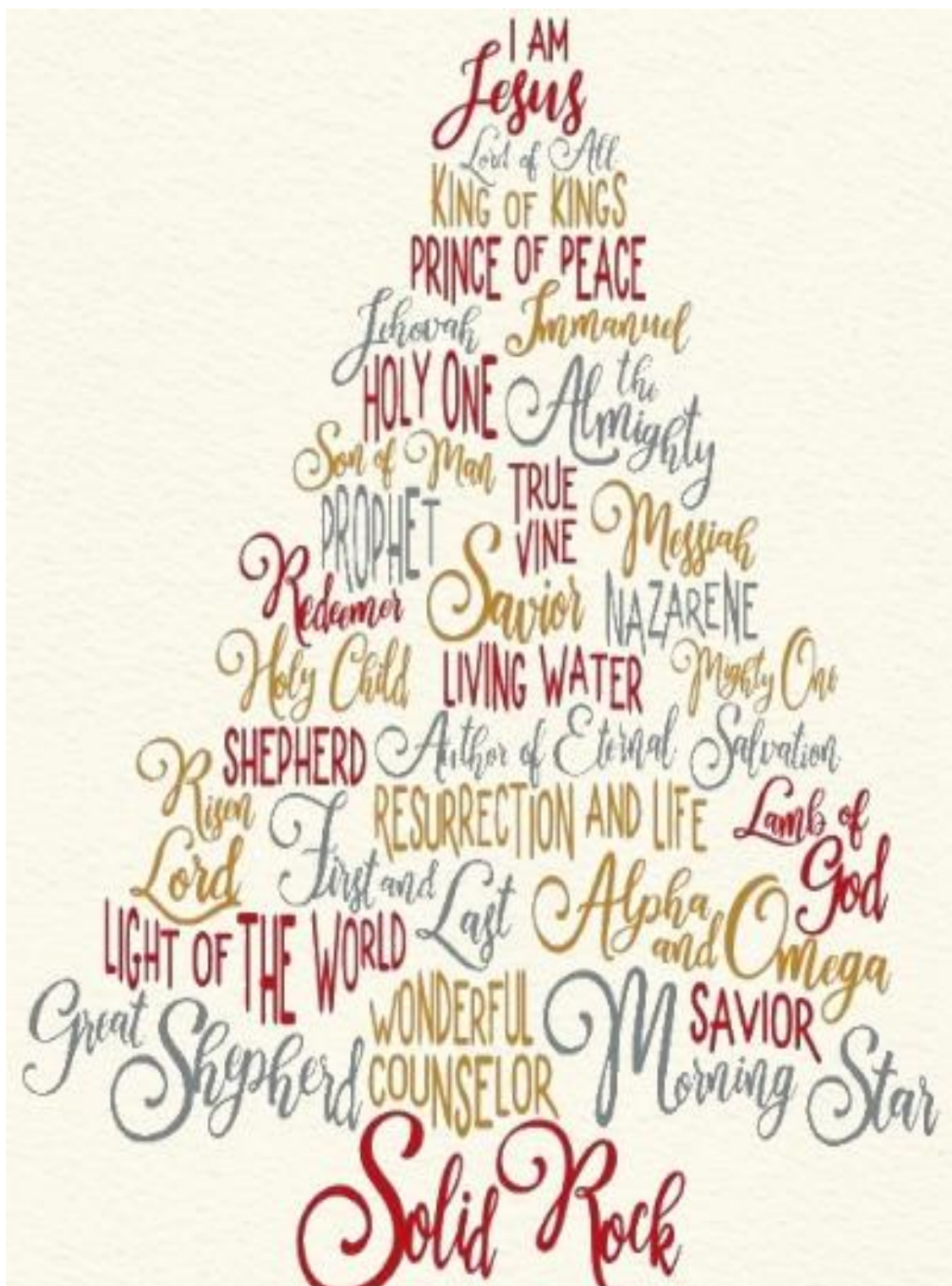


# Putting Christ back into Christmas



**Advent Reflections**

**Nottingham North East Circuit**

Welcome to this year's series of Advent reflections put together by the circuit staff team. Entitled putting 'Christ back into Christmas' we have focussed on items / events / people that many people might associate with a secular celebration at this time of year. But by looking deeper through the eyes of faith, we hope we have been able to reveal some of the sacred mystery associated with Advent and Christmas. We hope these reflections will invite you to think, discuss and reflect on the true meaning of this time of year, perhaps in house groups with those who share our faith and in conversation those who do not. You might even have fun guessing who wrote what!!

The Circuit Staff Team

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> Nov Room for all**

**Monday 28<sup>th</sup> Nov Christmas Wreaths**

**Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> Nov Snow**

**Wed 30<sup>th</sup> Nov Fairy tale of New York**

**Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> Dec Mistletoe**

**Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec Egg Nog**

**Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec Santa Fun Run**

**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> Dec Pigs in Blankets**

**Monday 5<sup>th</sup> Dec Crisis at Christmas**

**Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> Dec Real or Artificial?**

**Wed 7<sup>th</sup> Dec Brussel Sprouts**

**Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> Dec Tinsel**

**Friday 9<sup>th</sup> Dec Trifle**

**Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> Dec Poinsettia**

**Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> Dec Christmas Pudding**

**Monday 12<sup>th</sup> Dec Dog**

**Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> Dec Morecombe and Wise**

**Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> Dec Rubbish**

**Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> Dec Chocolate coins**

**Friday 16<sup>th</sup> Dec Posada**

**Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> Dec Feliz Navidad**

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> Dec Extendable tables**

**Monday 19<sup>th</sup> Dec Rudolph**

**Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> Dec Secret Santa**

**Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> Dec Pantomime**

**Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> Dec Mulled Wine**

**Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> Dec 12 days of Christmas**

**Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> Dec Twas the night ...**

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> Dec The King's speech**

**Monday 26<sup>th</sup> Dec Sales**

**Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> Dec Twixmas**

**Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> Dec Back to work**

**Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> Dec Thank you letters**

**Friday 30<sup>th</sup> Dec Unwanted Presents**

**Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> Dec Gift vouchers**

**Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> Jan Resolutions**

## Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> Nov Advent Sunday Room for all



I wonder if you have ever stopped to think about the diversity found within the Nativity story. And I don't mean the diversity found within school nativity stories where in order to accommodate and find room for all the children, characters and creatures appear that were never in the original story

Through Mary and Joseph there is room for the most unexpected of lead characters. People that society might look down upon or perhaps not notice at all, but people on, in and through God is able to work the most miraculous of events. Even when they themselves become refugees and seek asylum.

Through the various angels appearing again and again in the Christmas story, the thin veil between heaven and earth is briefly lifted. Through their role as God messengers there is room for revelation, for advice, for warning and for the proclamation of Good News to and for all

Through the shepherds there is room for those who possibly find themselves at the bottom of the social and economic scale. Rough around the edges and perhaps not gaining a lot of respect in people's eyes, it is this group of people that are chosen to be the first to hear of Jesus birth.

Through the Magi there is room for strangers, people who are different, people who are other. Via a message written in the stars these exotic foreigners are invited and respond to God's call to witnesses to the birth of a new king. And of course in and through their sheep, nature and all of creation is also invited to the party.

Through the incarnation, here is of course room for God, made flesh and blood, in and through Jesus. The real star of the show.

And of course there is room for you and me. Irrespective of who you are, your age, gender, ethnicity, faith or lack of it, social or economic status, profession or appearance. Irrespective of who you are, or who you have been, God know who you can be. This year The Methodist Church's theme for Advent is 'There is room'. So the question for all of us is, if there is indeed room for all, are we prepared to welcome all, to accept all, to walk with all, to love all, just as God has with us...all.

## Monday 28<sup>th</sup> Nov Christmas wreaths

Christmas wreaths are traditionally circular in shape and made from evergreen material. An evergreen survives the harsh winter conditions and was considered a sign of power, resilience, and the hope of eternal life. The circular shape has no beginning or end and was considered to represent God's infinite love for us.



In

Here is one we made earlier!

Europe, during the Advent period, a candle was added to symbolise the light that Jesus brought into the world. Later a German Lutheran Pastor, Johann Hinrich Wichern, was credited with using the wreath as a symbol of advent a tradition many of us are familiar with in our homes and churches.

Beginning with the first Sunday in Advent, the lighting of a candle may be accompanied by Scripture, devotion, song and prayer. An additional candle is lit on each subsequent Sunday, with the final one lit on Christmas day.

Advent is a season of expectant waiting and preparation, for the celebration of the birth of Jesus and the return of Jesus at the second coming.

But of course, it can be a busy time for most of us, as we prepare for Christmas.

In what ways can we make time to pause and reflect, to anticipate, to wait with expectation for the arrival of Jesus Christ?

*“Advent candles tell their story on this Christmas Day.*

*Those who waited for God’s glory: they prepared the way.*

*Christ is with us: loving, giving, in us living, here today!”*

## Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> Nov Snow

When you think of snow, what springs to mind? Christmas card images, beautiful scenes of snow-covered villages, with carol singers and happy families. Is it travellers, stranded by the side of the road, their car stuck in a snow drift? Maybe its children making snow angels on a day off school because teachers can't get into work. Maybe what springs to mind is 'I don't want to drive in this.'

Can I find a way to not have to go out?' I associate snow with my birthday, which is February, and there is often snow on the ground on that day. My Mam tells me there was 6 feet of snow when I was born. Slight exaggeration, I think!

Snow tells us to wrap up, it tells us that (in case we didn't already know) we're in winter, and the celebration in the midst of winter is Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

In the Bleak Midwinter, is a carol which references snow '*Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow*'. (Christina Rossetti 1830-1894). Which is strange for a song written to celebrate the birth of Jesus. There was no snow in Palestine when Jesus was born. Was the hymn written to tell people that Jesus' birth is relevant to them, to make them feel that this baby born thousands of years ago, thousands of miles away, is still key to their life?

I think it was, it's to link us now, to that event 2000 years ago. The first verse tells us that '*snow had fallen*', and there is no mention of Jesus. Verse 2 tells us that '*in the bleak midwinter, a stable place sufficed*.' It's to tell us that, despite the fact there was no snow in Palestine that day, Christ is for all people. Despite the fact he is a king, he was born the poorest of the poor, not in a palace but in a stable, with animals, dirty shepherds, in muck and noise and cold.



He's king of the world, powerful, compassionate, present everywhere, and he is king for all, God for all. Christ is king for everyone, prince or pauper, brigadier or banker, count or cleaner. Wherever we were born – which country, which building, city or village, at home or back of an ambulance, in the poorest village or the poshest hospital – Christ is for all people.

Snow may not have fallen on the day of his birth in Palestine, but when it falls here, in Nottingham, Christ is with us as it falls, as it disrupts our lives and makes driving difficult. Through all the difficulties, far worse than snow, Christ is always with us, whatever we're going through.

## Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> Nov The Pogues (Fairytale of New York)

For generations the United States of America was the dream for the Irish immigrants who sought hope and prosperity. There was resurgence in immigration in the early 1980's and it's believed that this dream of what they would find upon landing in New York was the real "Fairytale".



A la Panto-favourite "Dick Whittington" the expectation was that the streets were paved with gold and everyone could find fortune and happiness just by being there.

Irish band "The Pogues" took 2 years in crafting "Fairytale of New York" and their now annual hit shattered the illusion, painting the picture and telling the story of immigrants who failed to find what they were looking for upon arriving in New York (incidentally U2's "I still haven't found what I'm looking for" was released the same year... And both songs feature in the top half of NME's list of "500 Greatest Songs of All Time"!).

The language in the song has been frowned upon down the years, with controversy around profanity and use of language that has been seen as offensive and derogatory... And yet people keep coming back to the song. For me, it's just not Christmas until I've heard it played in public or on the radio!

But what's my learning? Where's Christ in this Christmas song?

The work of Christ is in the prophetic nature of a world in need of promise and hope: To a world in darkness, a light was coming. The birth of Christ is in the seeking and searching for a better way of life. As Zechariah prophesied in Luke 1:

A new day is dawning: the Sunrise from the heavens will break through in our darkness, and those who huddle in night, those who sit in the shadow of death, will be able to rise and walk in the light, guided in the pathway of peace.

The Christmas story is about waiting and finding, seeking and discovering.

But unlike the sad story of Irish immigrants who found their hopes were in vain, the hope found in Jesus promises not to disappoint, and offers us real new life.

## Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> Dec Mistletoe

I have to admit to being a bit of a sucker for a joyful, cheesy and nonsensical Christmas movie... you all know the type (don't pretend you don't!!)... Recently - I *know*, it's *too* early - I watched a couple where the main characters ended up (just before the credits rolled) under sprigs of mistletoe, and you know the rest! It's delightful!



However, in both instances I was incredulous... It wasn't mistletoe! One looked like holly, and the other was purple foil/tinsel with a single white bead attached to it! Now, I'm not a total pedant - probably - but I like details to be right! Thus I went looking and discovered that although mistletoe, the plant we might know and see in the UK, looks broadly like the sprig in the image above - generally with slender green stems and leaves with white berries - there are a couple of variants with red berries (more prevalent in the USA) so maybe one of those instances was broadly okay... broadly...! (the other; no!)

In my searching I also found out more about mistletoe. About its origins in Christmas traditions and about the biology of the plant too. I found out (from Wikipedia I admit!) that whilst they are often considered pests that kill trees and devalue natural habitats, a broad array of animals depend on mistletoe for food, consuming the leaves and young shoots, transferring pollen between plants and dispersing seeds. I also discovered its origins in Roman symbolism; of peace, love and understanding and how it was hung over doorways to protect households.

I learnt how the evergreen bushes symbolised fertility in the pre-Christian world and how this has been adapted and adopted too. In the Christian era, mistletoe in the Western world became associated with Christmas as a decoration under which people may kiss. By the 18th century it had also become incorporated into Christmas celebrations around the world.

So I wonder what Mistletoe might have to say to us in this season of Advent? Something about traditions for love (with consent of course...)? Something about research to aid our understanding? Something about life in the midst of winter? Something about decorating for Christmas (and watching movies to get you in the festive spirit)?! Maybe mistletoe says something about all of these?

Maybe, just maybe, it allows us to notice things - to pay attention to details - so that we can fully enter into the fullness and joy of the season as we prepare for the next part of the story. I think it might be that, and maybe - if mistletoe is part of your Christmas decor - you will notice that detail in the midst of everything else, and remember the joy and delight of advent itself!

## Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec Egg Nog



A Christmas day treat when I was young was to have a 'snowball'. It contained a tiny amount of a certain yellow coloured drink which was then mixed with a splash of orange squash and filled up with lemonade (no ice, we didn't have a freezer). It was rich and sickly and yet I loved it.

This drink can also be made without the help of an already mixed brand, which makes it an Egg Nog, but we never had it like that in our house.

When I think of drinking a snowball, I remember Christmas dinners where we fought over who was going to have a turkey leg, Christmas pudding with custard or rum sauce, and watching Christmas films (usually repeats of Mary Poppins, Oliver! or Chitty Chitty Bang Bang).

My sister and I would then play with our new presents and bemoan the fact that there wasn't a fire in any other room but the back one and so the rest of the house was cold and not an inviting place to play in.

Alongside the paper decorations, the tiny Christmas tree that stood on the sideboard and the cards pinned to string and hanging on the walls, there was a small nativity scene of the Holy Family. Although not active church goers, my parents like many of their generation, had gone to church as children.

For them, Christmas was mainly about enjoying the extra days off work whilst making it as fun as possible for us children, and Jesus didn't really get much of a look in. My sister and I sang carols at church but that was where Jesus stayed.

I can't help wondering if Jesus had been around at the time, whether he might have enjoyed joining in with the conversation around the dining table and partaking in a snowball or two!



## Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec Santa Fun Run



As you are reading this, perhaps over your cooked full English breakfast, I shall be taking part in the Jingle Bell Jog over in Darley Dale, just outside Matlock. This is a 5km 'fun' run in which all the runners, joggers and walkers are dressed as Santa in matching red suits and white beards.

After a suitable Santa-cise warm up I shall be sprinting, running, jogging and no doubt eventually plodding my way along the flat bridle path that runs alongside the Peak Rail railway track. And local have been warned that the horrendous sound they might hear is not one of Santa's reindeers in its final death throws, but more likely to be me trying to catch my breath in the early morning chill.

It is a chance not just to engage in some Advent activity and festive frivolity but also an opportunity to do some good; good for my own health but also good for others as well. We are used to seeing large scale running events such as the London Marathon or Great North run, being completed by people in memory of loved ones and often with the aim of raising money for innumerable charities through which they have a very personal connection. Today the £10 entry fee from all those entering the Jingle Bell Jog, will go to supporting Blythe House Hospice Care who provide treatment, counselling and care to those with terminal illnesses as well as their families across north Derbyshire.

For me running is not just a physical experience it is also a profoundly spiritual one, a time that is a real opportunity to pray. I have lost count of the number of times during every race when I have prayed 'Please God make this hill flatter', 'Please let my legs move quicker' or simply 'Just make it stop...now! The letter to the Hebrews compares the Christian faith journey to running a race, one that we should run with perseverance, one that is a marathon rather than a sprint, one that we do not run alone but are upheld and supported by a cloud of witnesses, one that we run with our eyes fixed on Jesus.

So the question is, as we run our race through all preparations, purchases and plans of the next few weeks, can we do so with our gaze firmly fixed on the Christ child, offering our gifts, our talents and our time in service to others?

## Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> Dec Pigs in Blankets

Pigs in Blankets were not a thing when I was growing up. I have a vague memory of full sized sausages being served with Christmas Dinner, but there was no bacon wrapping to be found. Although it is very much a British custom today, apparently the first recipes only appeared in 1957 and they came to prominence particularly in the 1990s thanks to Delia Smith. Tesco now reports that they are the most popular side dish at Christmas, even more so than Yorkshire puddings and definitely more popular than sprouts.



If you are in parts of the United States at this time of the year and someone offers you some pigs in blankets, check first what you are getting, as some areas with prominent Polish communities use the name to refer to a stuffed cabbage roll, which could really put a dampener on your Christmas dinner.

When I googled pigs in blankets, I found various different articles, including one article entitled “are they suitable for vegetarians”! But what surprised me especially was how many recipes there are for this traditional Christmas addition. I am no Delia Smith, but I reckon I could produce a reasonable pig in a blanket by taking a pork chipolata wrapped in some bacon.

Anyway, I hope this is not too tenuous for these reflections, but did you know the word “wrapped” appears in the Christmas story. It comes in Luke 2: 7 where Mary “wrapped” Jesus in bands of cloth or as we used to say, swaddling clothes. The practise of swaddling a baby is an ancient one and was widely practised until the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. After a baby was born it was rubbed with salt and oil, and then wrapped with strips of cloth to keep the child warm and ensured that its limbs grew straight. There is a reference in Ezekiel 16: 4 to Israel being unswaddled, which implies abandonment and neglect.

Wrapping a baby in swaddling clothes then was a symbol of care and nurture. Now of course in the Christmas story this is an image of the care and nurture that Mary has for her new born son. But, knowing from the parable of the sheep and goats that whatever we do for the least of these, we also do for Jesus, it is also a reminder of the care and nurture we all called to offer to those on the margins of a world in darkness this season.

## Monday 5<sup>th</sup> Dec Crisis at Christmas

I have often been asked when I started drinking my coffee without milk. I was seventeen and with the encouragement of my boyfriend at the time I told my family that I would not be spending all of Christmas with them but instead I would be volunteering for Crisis at Christmas.



My first full day was about a week before Christmas. I travelled to Southwark in a transit van full of donated mattresses and was greeted by a group of enthusiastic people, none of whom really knew what they were doing. However, we got stuck into sorting clothing, creating seating areas, checking the mobile toilets were ready, providing quiet areas where medical provision could be given and all the things you might expect for a project that would host hundreds of people who were homeless.

On my second visit Crisis at Christmas was in full swing. There were people everywhere, some were sitting in groups playing games whilst they chatted and laughed; others were waiting for fresh clothing; some were helping put up Christmas decorations; others sat quietly in their own world and occasionally there was an angry outburst or fight. I was put to work serving breakfasts and I had my first meaningful engagement with homeless people.

That day I fully realised that the homeless had feelings and emotions like me. They had jokes to tell; generosity to share and friendship to give. But each one also had a sadder story to tell of rejection, or addiction, or abuse. A few wanted to tell their stories; others hinted at their hidden pain, but most were just relieved to receive a welcome, a warm space and the grace-filled hospitality that was being offered to them.

Since then, I have tried to remember those lessons I learned that Christmas. As it says in the wonderful passage in John Chapter 1, *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*. Each and every person is made in the image of God and the Christ-light shines in them even in the darkest of places. Jesus loves each one and our role as his disciples is to be alongside others and to kindle and nurture that Christ-light by showing God's love to those we encounter.

So, what has this got to do with drinking my coffee without milk? After a hard morning's work, I was in need a hot cup of coffee. Little did I know that somehow, in that first day's chaos a sack of flea powder had been put with the sacks of milk powder!! The disgusting taste remains with me still.

## Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> Dec Real or artificial?

Having picked this topic I realise that it could be quite a contentious issue, and I don't mean it to be. I am not here to offer an opinion on which sort of tree you should have, but merely use it as a starting point for reflection.



Growing up we mostly had an artificial tree, a silver one. When we got married and were buying our first Christmas Tree, the Yorkshire in me came to the fore, "we will have an



artificial tree, I am not spending money every year!!" We bought our current (artificial) tree in the January sales of 2007. It is indeed a beautiful tree, but is beginning to show its age.

Some of the branches are falling out and it is dropping more 'foliage' than a real tree. For the past few years we have debated whether to call it a day and go for a real tree. But when it comes to putting the decorations away it is once again tied up and put back into its duvet cover and returned to the loft!

Last year was definitely going to be its last year. We would buy a real tree with roots that we could put in the garden for 11 months of the year and bring it back in over Christmas. However, I discovered that because our tree is so old, it is now carbon neutral – so back it went in the loft and I look forward to bringing it down in a few weeks' time, hunting for screws to attach the fallen branches and sweeping up the green tinsel and glitter from every room in the house - or so it seems!

As I wander around the shops, I have been noticing just how much of Christmas is artificial. Cans of artificial snow, penguins (not usually seen in Nottingham!!), plastic "glass" baubles, battery powered candles, "fake snowballs for a snow ball fight"!!!

In the middle of the artificial Christmas though there is something very real, very true. Something which isn't just for one month of the year only to be then bundled back in the loft or planted out in the garden. Something which is for every hour of every day, 12 months of the year. And that is the God of love, on earth in the form of a real baby. A love which is for everyone. So as we put away or throw away the artificial bits of Christmas, let's make sure we take the real part, the love of Christmas to share with everyone we meet.

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, love divine,  
Love was born at Christmas  
Star and Angels gave the sign.      *Christina Rossetti*

## Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> Dec Brussel Sprouts

Does anyone *really* like Brussel Sprouts?

My dad regularly tells the tale of being fed them for dinner and having a battle of wills with my grandfather until they were cold and it was bed time, and at that point the sprouts would be put in the fridge to be fed to him again the following meal.

I have grown to tolerate them down the years, but am increasingly looking for ways to make the palatable. My current preferred cooking technique is to dice and sauté them in a little garlic oil with some lardons and chorizo. It keeps (and indeed adds to) the colour on my Christmas dinner plate, whilst also masking the flavour I don't like.



I wonder what other things we do similar with?

I'd suggest that one thing we chop up and dress with extras to cover up the "flavours" we don't like is with the Christmas story.

Particularly with our popular retellings and family-friendly versions we tend to get rid of the bitterness of a world lived in darkness expecting a Messiah and Jesus' flight to Egypt to avoid the mass slaughter of baby boys by Herod.

We quickly gloss over the cultural stigma of the teenage Mary's pregnancy outside of wedlock and the shame of Elizabeth's barrenness in her old age.

We imagine the clean and painless birth that Mary is the first woman since Eve to have been blessed with, sing about the perfect baby Jesus who refuses to cry, and dress our cutest children in white with halos and wings to represent the angel-armies of God.

And this clean and sanitised Jesus will last us until Easter, at which point he'll have a neat trickle of blood run down his cheek from the slight discomfort of a crown of thorns and peacefully breathe his last.

Can we start challenging that? Let's start with being honest about the darkness of the world into which Emmanuel is born:

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. - *Isaiah 9:2*

## Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> Dec Tinsel



Tinsel has played a part in my Christmas for as long as I can remember. The colours were limited (red and gold in our house) when I was younger but that was the only significant difference compared with today, although a lot of the tinsel produced is now plastic.

We were remembering the Blue Peter Advent wreath, covered in tinsel and then later banned because of Health and Safety, the Scrooge of Christmas. No school Nativity Play is complete without a little shimmer of tinsel playing the part of halos on the heads of the little angels.

Taking down the Christmas decorations is always something to look forward to, as despite hoovering the carpets countless times, tinsel still has a habit of appearing in the darkest corners of the room, throwing its gleaming 'missed me' look at you!

Modern tinsel was invented in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1610, and was originally made of shredded silver. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the word is from the Old French word *estincele*, meaning "sparkle".

Tinsel made its first public appearance in England in 1846. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert appeared in the Illustrated London News, standing with their children around a Christmas tree decorated with tinsel, candles, and small bead ornaments.

Because of Queen Victoria's popularity, the Royal family's decorated tree became the height of fashion sweeping through both the British and East Coast American Societies.

Tinsel makes a lovely festive decoration, but are our Christmases really as sparkly as this? Perhaps it's also good for us to be reminded that there was no glitter and sparkle in the borrowed stable on that first Christmas night.

## Friday 9<sup>th</sup> Dec Trifle

A classic dessert – surely not just for Christmas time?

A trifle is, traditionally, a cold dessert of sponge cake and fruit covered with layers of custard, jelly and cream. A “trinity of layers”, some might say.

Do you remember the “Friends” episode where Rachel makes a trifle that includes layers of beef sautéed with peas and onions, unaware that the pages of her cookbook were stuck together.

However, there are other definitions for the word “trifle”. Although, it wasn’t just me that went straight to the pudding, right? The word trifle can also describe a thing of little value, importance or significance.

The period leading up to Christmas is usually a busy time for all of us. The to-do list gets longer, the shops get busier, the stress levels rise.



But I do wonder if some of the things we worry about as we prepare for Christmas are really that important?

I love inviting people into our home, I’ve always wanted people to feel welcome, comfortable and at ease. However, I need notice! Because there is something inside me that insists the house has to be spotless.

I can reason that no one else will even notice and that they haven’t (usually) come to inspect my level of cleanliness. But invariably, this causes me some anxiety. Yet I know that the state of my under stairs cupboard is of very little importance, “I needn’t trouble myself over such trifles.”

I wonder which things we can apply the word “trifle” to this advent?

Let’s try and focus on the things that are important. On family and friends, of time together and fellowship shared. Of this period of Advent, of expectant waiting and preparation, to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas and of the return of Christ.

You may be surprised to find that the word trifle does appear several times in the Bible, in various contexts. I’ll leave you with this

Proverbs 26:22 *“the words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles.*

*And they go down into the inmost body.”*

## Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> Dec Poinsettia

I know the poinsettia is a staple part of many peoples' decorations over the festive period, but it's not really featured much in my Christmas thinking... So I had to do some research to find out where they come into Christmas.

Wikipedia, the fount of all knowledge, tells me that apparently:

"The plant's association with Christmas began in 16th-century Mexico, where legend tells of a girl, commonly called Pepita or María, who was too poor to provide a gift for the celebration of Jesus' birthday and was inspired by an angel to gather weeds from the roadside and place them in front of the church altar.

Crimson blossoms sprouted from the weeds and became poinsettias. From the 17th century, Franciscan friars in Mexico included the plants in their Christmas celebrations. The star-shaped leaf pattern is said to symbolise the Star of Bethlehem, and the red colour represents the blood sacrifice of Jesus' crucifixion."



And what comes to mind when you read that?

For me it's the famous last verse of Christina Rossetti's "In the Bleak Midwinter":

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;  
if I were a wise man I would do my part;  
yet what I can I give him — give my heart.

I can take or leave the rest of the song (sorry fans!), but that last verse is infinitely important in my theology and my response to what I've found every time I've looked into the manger with intention.

It's not a Christmas passage but considering what I have to offer, poor as I am, and the offering of "Pepita", I invite you to reflect on Mark 12:41-44 -

"He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, 'Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.'"

What are you bringing this Christmas?



## Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> Dec Christmas Pudding

Some people love it, some people have a very strong dislike for it. Like it or hate it - it has nothing to do with marmite... (although the now Director of the World Health Organisation once described it as being like tarmac when he first tried it at our house one Christmas when I was a teenager!). My abiding memory though is of them cooking on 'Stir up Sunday' - or whenever mum decided to do it!



The smell would fill the house, and then there would be the anticipation of the deliciousness of it smothered in custard/sauce/cream/ice-cream (or all of the above!)... There is certainly a certain decadence about it as a part of a Christmas feast. The richness of it, the exotic flavours, fruits and spices.

The time it takes to do it properly, and the spectacle of it as it presented at the table in flames are, for me, part of the joy of them too. They are treasure in their way, and historically might have a silver sixpence hidden inside too (just to keep dentists in business!).

Christmas pudding has its origins in medieval England, with early recipes making use of dried fruit, suet, breadcrumbs, flour, eggs and spice, along with liquid such as milk or fortified wine. Later recipes became more elaborate. The collect for the Sunday before Advent in the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer begins with the words "Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works...".

This makes me think of the gifts that are often associated with Christmas, of the spices and riches the Magi offer, and of the gifts we focus on. I don't mean the shopping and preparation, or the wish lists and letters to Santa that are sent to the North Pole. I mean the gifts of good works - of charitable giving, of acts of kindness, of gathering people together.

This is what this season symbolises for me - people meeting to celebrate, to share, to connect, and to find joy. It is a season of thanksgiving and of giving with thanks. For in the midst of all this - be it with decadence or the simple pleasure of falling asleep in a chair surrounded by the aftermath - we celebrate the greatest gift, and the stirring of our will to reflect the wonder, and warmth and love seen in the preparation of this pudding; for Jesus' birth gifts to us the impetus to make life more wonder-full, warmer, and loving. May our wills be stirred (and puddings too!) as we prepare for that great day.

## Monday 12<sup>th</sup> Dec Dog (or was it God): Not just for Christmas



It is one of the regular occurrences of Christmas, that perhaps pestered by pleading children with tear filled eyes, after much initial resistance (and it might be said common sense) families relent and purchase a puppy.

And all is great for a few weeks and then the endless need for walks on dark, cold, wet winter days, the chewing of furniture, the surprise 'packages' and puddles on the floor and the rapidly declining interest from the very same children who begged you to buy the dog in the first place, mean that animal rescue centres suddenly become inundated with unwanted dogs. And Paul O'Grady has enough material for another series of Dogs in Distress!!!

In a similar way the attraction of God (which is dog backwards in case you hadn't worked out where this was going) also seems to have a limited appeal to many even at Christmas. And let's remember if there is no Christ then all we are left with is...mas.

In one of my previous circuits I was always amazed at just how busy our joint ecumenical Christmas Eve service was. It was packed, jammed to the rafters with people from all walks of life. Packed that was until the moment when all the familiar favourite carols had been sung and the boring religious bit was about to start.

And then people couldn't get out of the place quick enough back to the real world and their secular Christmas. God it seemed didn't get much of a look in, and just like buying a dog, what had seemed a great idea at the time suddenly wasn't quite as appealing.

Thankfully for us, God's attention span isn't as fickle as either the impulsive dog buyer or the secular carol singer. Irrespective of how much attention, care, feeding, walking, cleaning up, company or medical treatment we need God is always there. Even when we have misbehave, destroy the things we have been given, refuse to fetch the ball or even run away from home, God's love for us is constant and everlasting, even when we find we have put ourselves in the dog house.

Make no bones about it God is always ready to accompany us on our 'walkies' through life, and that is surely something to get our tails wagging!

## Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> Dec Morecambe and Wise

Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise, obviously known as Morecambe and Wise (or Eric and Ernie), have been described as "the most illustrious, and the best-loved, double-act that Britain has ever produced". Their partnership lasted from 1941 until Morecambe's death in 1984.

In thinking about Morecambe and Wise for these pages, there is certainly a lot of material to use. Every year from 1969 until 1980 (with the exception of 1974 when Eric had suffered a heart attack), the Morecambe and Wise Christmas Special was possibly the biggest program on television. Even today, many years later, many of the sketches from these shows remain favourites for many. And that could have been the first thing to consider in this reflection, for joy should permeate the Christmas story and the difference it brings to our lives.

But I was also very tempted to reflect upon the surprises which were also a hallmark of the Christmas specials. They included Andre Previn keeping very straight faced whilst Eric massacred Grieg's piano concerto. There was also Glenda Jackson as Cleopatra, at the time a noted Shakespearean actress, delivering the line "all men are fools and what makes them so is having beauty like what I have got". But perhaps the most surprising was the year that Angela Rippon moved from behind her news desk, whipped off her skirt and launched into dance.

The Christmas story is of course filled with all sorts of surprises too, not least of which is the nature of the incarnation itself.

But the thing I do want to reflect upon was what often made the programs so funny, namely Eric Morecambe turning to camera, breaking the fourth wall as it is known, and delivering some great one liner, or perhaps offering a visual gag with his trade mark glasses.



In the story of the birth of Jesus, Matthew in particular regularly breaks the fourth wall. He does so with Biblical quotations interjected into the story which are designed to help us better understand the magnitude of the events in Bethlehem many years ago. Over and over again Matthew notes that many of the events he describes happened to "fulfil the prophecy" written many centuries before. His intent is not to offer these prophecies as a random proof text, but that the birth of this incredible child is part of God's long planned decisive intervention in the world. And that, everyone, definitely brings us sunshine!

## Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> Dec That's just rubbish!!!



Christmas is fast approaching. From Christmas trees to toys and gifts, we give so much attention to the goods we buy and the atmosphere we enjoy, but very little to the rubbish we create year on year. Christmas has evidently shown to be the most wasteful festival in the UK.

According to Business Waste online, each year the UK dumps 160,000 tonnes of trees which give off 100,000 tons of toxic gases. Packaging Online also reveals that each year we waste 270,000 tons of food and 125,000 tons of plastic packaging which could end up in landfills for hundreds of years.

As we start our preparation for Christmas this year, can we think of ways to celebrate with less waste and more recycling? I know that the Gedling Play Forum collects “rubbish” from factories and shops which would have gone to landfills and turns it into all sorts of craft activities for the local community. One person’s trash is another person’s treasure. It depends on whose hands it is in. I am sure you can also create many ideas on how to turn “rubbish” into “treasure”.

Jesus came into this world to re-purpose humanity, and we are all in God’s “recycling” business. 1 Samuel 2:8 says that “The LORD raises the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash heap”. The original Hebrew word for “ash heap”, אֶשְׁפָּא also means “garbage dump”.

No one is beyond the reach of God’s compassion or his ability to heal. No matter what rubbish life throws at us, how rubbish we may feel at times, there is always hope to turn it around in the hands of God. Ephesians 2:10 says that “we are made anew in Christ”, through whom the broken-hearted can be made whole, the downtrodden can be set free, and those who are regarded as “rubbish” can become God’s treasured possession.

## Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> Dec Chocolate Coins.



As a child there is something magical about waking up on Christmas morning to feel the sack (in our case a pillowcase) filled with presents at the end of your bed. In our family these early morning presents were tokens from Father Christmas: things like novelty pens; a satsuma, new gloves, a ladybird book AND always tucked away at the bottom was a bag of

chocolate coins. The bag of chocolate coins seemed more significant than the 10-shilling notes (yes, I am that old) that arrived from my multitude of great aunts later in the day.

Finding the edge of the foil and unpeeling it to reveal the contents (often cutting your finger in the process) took time and when finally, the chocolate entered your mouth it didn't matter that it was a low-quality, fatty confectionary because it was a special Christmas treat that we were allowed to eat in bed before breakfast. Special memories are often created by simple moments and traditions like this.

As an adult I still buy chocolate coins for my grandchildren despite grimacing at the price, hoping that they too will remember the undemanding family moments which bind us together. With so many families struggling financially it seems important to find happiness and make memories in simple acts rather than burdening ourselves with debt to fulfil the image of Christmas which the marketing departments of retailers project.

Remembering the joy of unpeeling the chocolate coins as a child reminds me of how we reveal the Christmas story over this season of Advent. We uncover the treasures of God's presence throughout history. We realise that those God chose to use were not the most educated, the best in battle, the highest quality leaders but they were right for the occasion. Their role in God's story is to disclose to us the wideness of God's love for his people and how he longs for us to be reconciled with him. As we uncover the familiar biblical stories, we delight once again in their contents.

The greatest treasure, of course, is revealed on Christmas Day with the birth of Jesus. God comes to us in the form of a tiny, vulnerable baby. As that baby grows into a man he reveals more about God's kingdom and how by following him we belong to his family; we are welcomed; we are part of God's story. As I watch the grandchildren open their chocolate coins this year I will pray that they learn to love the true story of Christmas as revealed in Jesus.

## Friday 16<sup>th</sup> Dec Posada

A Posada is a tradition originating in Mexico, the word is Spanish for “inn”.

Some churches in our country have adopted a similar tradition. Whilst practice will vary, usually between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> of December a small version of Mary and Joseph will travel around different households within the community, staying at each for a night. Mary and Joseph will return to the church on Christmas eve as we anticipate the birth of Jesus.



Mary and Joseph found a place to stay in our guinea pigs' cage.

It is a great way of getting members of the congregation and their families involved. People will often take photographs and record Mary and Joseph's journey.

But of course, it has real meaning. It speaks of our call, as Christians, to be welcoming and show generous hospitality.

Jesus and his followers depended on hospitality; there were not many places to stay, people were poor and the journeys were dangerous. Jesus shared their experience of having nowhere to stay. During his ministry, Jesus welcomed all; the stranger, the lost, those on the margins of society and those considered undesirable.

We think today of the many, many asylum seekers that make a difficult and dangerous journey in the hope of finding a refuge, a safe place to stay. Let us keep them in our prayers.

And how about those in our congregations and communities that may live alone and may feel lonely or isolated. How can we show them hospitality at this time of year?

And finally, as we recall Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, as they searched for a place to stay and welcome the birth of Jesus. Let us endeavour to make room for Jesus this Christmas time.

Luke 2:7 *“And she gave birth to her firstborn son*

*and wrapped him in bands of cloth,*

*and laid him in a manger,*

*because there was no place for them in the inn.”*

## Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> Dec Feliz Navidad

The Christmas Season is filled with many different traditions and this is perhaps in large part what we love most about it. These traditions are experiences that we have shared with our loved ones, present or departed, over many, many years. But what about the rest of world?

In Japan for instance, it has become common on Christmas Day to celebrate by having dinner from KFC, with people waiting up to 2 hours in line. I am not sure this has anything to do with the birth of Jesus and having seen Colonel Sanders dressed as Santa, all I can say (in the words of Crimewatch) is “please do not have nightmares”.



In Venezuela, more specifically in the capital city of Caracas, it is customary to [rollerblade to Christmas Mass](#)! The 9 Masses leading up to Christmas, known as Misas de Aguinaldo, take place from December 16th to December 24th. During this time, rollerblading to church is not only allowed, but encouraged by the government. The city blocks vehicles on certain streets until 8 am each morning to allow citizens to safely participate in this unique Christmas tradition.

In the Netherlands, the 5th of December is the most important day of the festive season for children. Indeed, Sinterklaas (who lives in Spain) brings them their presents that day, with children usually leaving a shoe out by the fireplace or a windowsill, previously filled with carrots for Sinterklaas's horse. And I can imagine if you spend much of Christmas Day in the kitchen, you might appreciate that the traditional way to eat with family and friends on Christmas days is called *gourmetten*. All guests get tiny raclette pans and prepare their own meal at the centre of the table!

Finally, poinsettia plants which bloom in winter, are indigenous to Central America, specifically to southern Mexico. A Mexican legend tells of a girl who had nothing to offer the baby Jesus at the Christmas Eve Services but a bunch of weeds. When she knelt down to deposit the weeds by the nativity scene, the bouquet burst into bright red flowers. Ever since, the bright red flowers, whose leaves are thought to be shaped like the star of Bethlehem, were known as the *Flores de Noche Buena*, or Flowers of the Holy Night, and have become synonymous with Christmas.

Feliz Navidad – Buon Natale - Frohe Weihnachten – Merry Christmas

## Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> Dec Extendable Tables

I'm sure most of you will have seen adverts on TV showing a long table, heaving with Christmas food, several platters of meat, steaming dishes of vegetables, Christmas puddings and other goodies. Crackers, candles, gleaming cutlery, place settings for lots and lots of people. A family and friends setting, with fine glasses for drinks, everything ready for a perfect Christmas dinner. These tables are not normally that size, unless you live in a baronial castle, these tables have to be extended to allow more people to sit at them on special occasions.

But what if you are not part of that special occasion. What if you are miles away from family on Christmas Day because of work. What if you work shifts, like nurses and doctors, fire fighters, and by the time you get home its midnight on Christmas Night, so dinner is finished with. Or, what if you are alone, for whatever reason, and will be on your own on Christmas Day. Some people may like that, others not so much. Because of bereavement, or family fall-outs, or distance or various other reasons.



These adverts on TV show the perfect Christmas dinner, lots of people laughing, a perfect family, perfect grandparents, parents, and children. There is sometimes even a perfect dog, sitting under the table waiting patiently for snacks. The extendable table has had to be used because there is so much food and love and family – a perfect Christmas.

And yet, there are plenty of people who will be on their own this Christmas. Those that watch the TV adverts and wish for a different life. Imagine the child in foster care or a care home, imagine the refugee family living in temporary accommodation, no idea what the future may bring. Imagine the parents scraping together enough money to buy presents or food or pay for heating. Perhaps they turn up at the food bank because they just have to... imagine the elderly man on his own, maybe his family is away, or he never married, maybe his wife has died, he's on his own. He has no need for an extendable table.

Imagine all those people, struggling for whatever reason, and spare a thought for them, spare a prayer for the people who are struggling through these dark winter nights, when all around is supposed to be peace and joy, but in fact they feel no joy at all. There may even be people in your churches who feel like that but they don't say anything. Spare a thought and a prayer for the people who have no need for an extendable table.



## Monday 19<sup>th</sup> Dec Rudolph the red nosed reindeer



When is Rudolph's favourite day of the year? The Red Nose Day!

*Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer had a very shiny nose. If you ever saw it, you will even say it glows...* We are all familiar with that Christmas song. Rudolph's shiny red nose makes him stand out of the crowd.

I cannot help but think on Jesus. Just like Rudolph, from being teased and rejected by others because of his glowing nose, to shining the way for Santa, Jesus went through a similar journey. He was mocked and rejected because he shone true light in this dark world and the world did not accept him, but after the resurrection, he lit up the way for people to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Being teased and left out by others could be a terrifying experience because of our differences. But aren't we all different in some ways? With all the differences we have, together we reflect a more wholesome and vibrant image of God.

Jesus is the Light of the world. As Christ followers, we have now received this true light inside us. Like Rudolph, we all need to shine, although not through our noses! When we love the unlovable, forgive those who offended us, and bring peace to conflicts, we shine the light of Jesus; when we dare to be different in the face of evil, dare to speak truth in the face of confusion, and dare to defend the weak in the face of power, we shine the light of Jesus.

Even though sometimes we may be teased or rejected by others because of the different values we hold, we must shine otherwise the world will never know that there is a different way of living. After all, it is Christ who shines through us. Let us be his light

## Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> Dec Secret Santa

I think I have mentioned before my dislike of shopping, particularly Christmas shopping. I seem to be missing that imaginative gene, which can go into a shop and think that this trinket, or that knick-knack will be the perfect present for someone. Knowing this, you can imagine my fear when the words, Secret Santa, are mentioned and I am expected to buy a present for someone I barely know. Of course, the price limitation makes reaching those decisions even harder.



The drawing of names for each giver and recipient also raises interesting questions about the relationships I have with the people participating. For some, my sense of humour is embraced; for others it is an affront. Cosmetics, bath essentials and chocolates are safe, but boring, bets for most female friends, but I am not sure every man wants to receive these, but neither will they particularly jump for joy at a torch or screwdriver.

The words of Christina Rossetti's carol, *In the bleak midwinter* spring to mind, particularly the first line of the final verse: *What can I give him?* Every time I get involved in Secret Santa this is my burning question. *What can I give him?* I will look for ideas on the internet; I will speak to family to see if they have any suggestions; I try the shops in the city, but I always struggle to find the witty, cheap but fun present that I believe must be out there, somewhere.

But that carol continues and reminds us that each person would bring a different present to the baby Jesus depending on their circumstances. The recognition that the only gift we may have to offer is our heart is a good reminder that material gifts are fine, but it is our relationships with one another that are most important.

Whilst Christmas can be about renewing and deepening our relationships with our family and friends, the real gift is the one God gave us - God incarnate - born as a child in the stable. In Jesus, God's love is manifest. Through Jesus, our relationship with God is restored. With Jesus, we have the hope that we can have better relationships with everyone.

Maybe next time I am invited to take part in a Secret Santa I might find a beautiful copy of the nativity and invite someone to learn more about the love of God through Jesus.

## Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> Dec Pantomimes



Last year I went to see the Christmas pantomime at the theatre Royal in Nottingham, my first visit to such an event for years. And I have to admit it was a really good experience.

I was struck that despite it appearing to be a simple tale, a closer look revealed how there were several layers to the performance, some aimed at the children and young people present and some aimed very definitely at the adults in the crowd. At heart a pantomime is a theatrical battle between good and evil, where the evil is often disguised behind outlandish makeup, a sensational costume and an enormous bosom!

I was intrigued that no matter how well I thought I knew the story there were new revelations that made me see the characters and moral of the tale in a different light. And of course there were the heroes and villains of the tale, sometimes not inhabiting the role we expect them to be, sometimes finding themselves playing dual parts and even on occasions being transformed from the baddie of the pantomime who everyone loves to hate into the unexpected hero of the hour.

I was surprised at how contemporary and relevant an age old story was to the world in which we are living today and that the narrative was not something that we viewed from a distance but something that invited us to get involved with, be part of, participate in.

A bit like the bible when you think about it, a collection of books often described as being on one superficial level shallow enough to be able to wade in and at the same time deep enough for an elephant to swim. A collection of wonderful stories, featuring great characters that reveal new insights the more we encounter it. Speaking not just to a context thousands of years ago but one that is relevant in the here and now. And of course a story, history, HIS-STORY, that we are all invited to play an active part in.

But of course unlike a pantomime where the cry often heard is 'It's behind' you' as we continue to delve the depths of God's love for us and creation we realise that the best is not behind us at all, but is in fact still to come.

## Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> Dec Mulled wine



The sound of laughter in the air, smells of hotdogs and burgers, lights twinkling, people jostling to get to the beautifully decorated stalls, filled with goodies you never knew you needed.

A description of Christmas markets everywhere. I used to live in Lincoln, where the Christmas market is legendary. A wonderful place to visit for a few hours, but both a joy and a curse for residents trying to navigate the closed roads around the city centre.

One of the beverages universally available to visitors at the markets is mulled wine. Mulled wine is a warm beverage made by—you guessed it—mulling wine. Typically, a red variety is steeped with mulling spices like cinnamon, cloves, allspice, anise, and nutmeg. Citrus fruits and raisins are sometimes added to the mixture to enhance its flavour. Most mulled wine is alcoholic, but there are non-alcoholic versions.

Depending on where you're sipping it, mulled wine goes by a few different names: Glogg (Sweden), Vin Chaud (France), or Glühwein (Germany).

Taking a mouthful of this warming, fragrant drink on a cold day, along with friends and family whilst at the Christmas market is definitely in my memory bank. When the warm coat, hat, scarves and gloves don't quite do the job, mulled wine on a cold, winters day helps to keep the chills off.

Mulled wine definitely 'warms the cockles' and it might even remind us of the warmth of love experienced at Christmas time, as we gather together to celebrate the birth of the Son of God. And what a joy it is to inhale not only that sweet fragrance of cinnamon and spices, but also the fragrance of Jesus.

## Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> Dec Twelve Days of Christmas



There is an interpretation of the Twelve Days of Christmas song that suggests that at a time when Christians were forbidden from worshipping openly, the song was used to secretly sing about Christian teaching.

Each gift on the list was seen as symbolising a different aspect of Christian faith. So the partridge in a pear tree is Jesus, two turtle doves are the Old and New Testaments, all the way through to drummers drumming being 12 points of doctrine, and including 8 maids a milking as the beatitudes and 9 ladies dancing as the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Sadly, I believe this interpretation is now considered to be false and perhaps it would seem quite odd that a secret song about the Christian faith would keep repeating the word Christmas! However, the twelve days of Christmas (also known as Christmastide) from Christmas Day until the 5<sup>th</sup> January should hold a special significance for followers of Christ. This goes back to the Council of Tours in 567 CE which proclaimed this as a sacred and festive season.

Many of the traditions of Christmastide have now seeped into Advent or even earlier, but they include Christmas decorations (which have been on display in shops since October), celebration meals (which can come thick and fast in December) and singing Christmas carols (which one year I think I once managed to sing over 100 before Christmas Day).

However, these twelve days of Christmas are not only meant to be a special celebration as we rejoice at the “good news of great joy for all the people” but also an extended opportunity to reflect on the mystery of the incarnation, the word becoming flesh. Here we are reminded that during that first Christmas 2000 or so years ago, we started to see in that bundle of cells and genetic material, exactly what God was like. In his words and his teaching, in his healing and his calling, in his laughter and his tears, in his welcoming compassion and his challenging of injustice and in his love, incredibly, we are looking at God.

## Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> Dec Twas the night before Christmas

The night before Christmas in our house is not really Christmas Eve, its December 24<sup>th</sup>, my husband's birthday! We try and get everything done by the 23<sup>rd</sup> so that his birthday doesn't get lost in the midst of Christmas preparations and he can celebrate just like anyone else.

When the children were small though, the birthday finished after tea and it was finally Christmas Eve. Named labels were tied to Christmas sacks and placed under the Christmas tree; a mince pie and a glass of milk were placed on the table for Santa and a carrot with a bowl of water placed on the doorstep for Rudolph.



The main lights were turned off and we sat on the sofa in the glow of the Christmas tree lights and read...  
“Twas the night before Christmas and all-round the house,  
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse...”

I wonder what the night before Christmas was really like. For the Shepherds it would have started like any other night. Putting together some food and wrapping up against the cold. Climbing up the hillside with a lantern to light the uneven path. Perhaps lighting a fire to keep warm or to ward off wild animals, talking amongst themselves to pass the long hours in the dark. And then that ordinary night became the most extraordinary as the sky was filled with angels with a strange message telling them to go to Bethlehem. Certainly not something they would have experienced before. So I wonder what it was that made them go hurrying back down the hillside? Perhaps it was the strangeness of the incident itself, a sort of power pulling them towards that stable. Or maybe it was a feeling of expectation that this was something new, an opportunity for something different, that the ordinary could become the extraordinary.

What does the night before Christmas hold for you? Peeling potatoes or sprouts; preparing the turkey or setting the table; a party with friends or finally sitting down for a well-earned rest. Whatever our night before Christmas holds, let's try and find that sense of expectation that the ordinary may become the extraordinary, and like the shepherds may we...

“Swiftly from (our) stupor rise, and be carried to Bethlehem  
to see the saviour of the world...”

## Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> Dec The King's speech

This year, at about three o'clock on Christmas Day, for the first time since 1951, the nation will be addressed by the King. It's a time of change and a time of wondering... Will the new king, Charles III, continue the legacy of Elizabeth II and speak words of reassurance and encouragement?



For me it raises a question of who has the right to speak. In the 2010 film of the same title we saw portrayed the struggle and the success of George VI finding his voice in order to share his message of hope in dark times. But he, like his descendants, had certain privileges which allowed him that voice - and the right to speak. It leads me to think about what we might do to make an opportunity for our voices to be heard.

I am confident that we have a message - and a message worth hearing. This was often a central component of the late Queen's speeches over the last six or so decades. That Jesus is the centre of the celebration of this day, of the festivities of this season. "For Christians, as for all people of faith, reflection, meditation and prayer help us to renew ourselves in God's love, as we strive daily to become better people. The Christmas message shows us that this love is for everyone. There is no one beyond its reach" the late Queen said in 2013. It is this message that we too have to share. It is this message that we too have the right to proclaim. So how do we find our voice(s) in order to do that?

The message we share is one of our striving in the service of God, but it is also one of hope. The film referenced above is also a story of hope; of overcoming, and triumphing, against considerable odds. The world we live in at the moment is one where the odds seem stacked - stacked against people in poverty, people in minority groups, people in situations of conflict and oppression, people in developing countries, people suffering as a result of the climate crisis, people whose day to day security based in their essential human rights - for food, shelter, and dignity - is lacking, and people whose wellbeing (mental, physical, social, financial, spiritual, environmental, and vocational) is lacking. Yet we have a voice, and we have a message; a message of hope - even in this and even for these, our global and local human family.

May this Advent and Christmas be one where we are able to confidently and joyfully share this message of hope. May our lives and activities as individuals and as Christians in community reflect the hope of the incarnation - God with us - the Prince of Peace and King of all.

## Monday 26<sup>th</sup> Dec Sales



Sales used to be something that was confined to New Year/January, when items came down astronomically. These days there are lots of sales throughout the year as the retail industry attempts to recoup some additional revenue and get rid of old stock.

Sales were intended to enable shops to survive until the next big spending spree, probably Easter, and to extend the Christmas purchasing period for at least another month. For instance, record tokens would be redeemed in January (because shops were closed over Christmas) and frequently albums were released at the same time to accommodate this.

I know of people who didn't buy or receive Christmas presents because they waited to get a bargain in the New Year sales. Maybe sometimes they did find a bargain, but getting a present which was supposedly received to remind us of the gift of Jesus, God's son, seems to lose something if you have to wait until after Christmas to open it.

The danger of sales for the consumer is that they rush to get a bargain and end up buying lots of things that they don't really want, let alone need. And we all know that this mentality is what the retailer relies upon.

But this in turn then leads to people spending money that they don't really have, especially following the excessive outlay on Christmas festivities.

Rejoicing in what we already have and not wanting more isn't always easy, but maybe this could be a part of our New Year's resolutions this year? I know that I need to work on giving thanks for all that I have, remembering that I have already received the greatest gift.



## Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> Dec Twixmas

A term to describe the period between Christmas and New Year (and nothing to do with the chocolate bar). The word originates from the old English word “betwixt” which simply means between.

It has been described as a sort of limbo in celebrations, a No-Man’s land of productivity and a time-warp when nobody knows what day it actually is anymore.

How we view this time probably largely depends on our circumstances. For many it is simply a time to return back to work.

However, depending on our work and family commitments, this may be a time to fully relax and spend our days doing nothing. The stress of Christmas day is over and now we have time to slow down a little, take a deep breath and recharge our batteries before we welcome in another year.

Perhaps it’s a chance to get out in the fresh air and take a walk in the countryside or an opportunity to visit family or meet up with friends.

For those feeling a little more ambitious it might be time for a new DIY project, or an opportunity to be creative in the kitchen using the leftovers – Brussels sprout and turkey tray bake anyone?



For others it’s a time when it feels perfectly acceptable to wear pjs all day, drink the leftover Baileys and eat nothing but chocolate and the leftover cheeseboard. A time to curl up on the sofa and watch the box set of Home Alone films.

With online shopping we can hit the sales without even leaving the house.

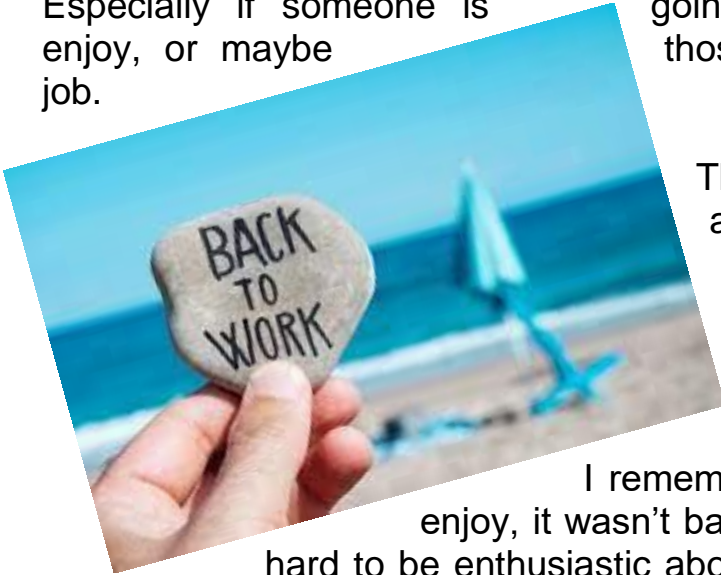
But of course, this can also be a really difficult time for people. Loneliness can be worse at this time of year, with the usual weekly groups on hold and others spending time with their families. Spending more time at home with family members isn’t a happy time for everyone. There is the pressures associated with the rising cost of living, at a time which is often more expensive.

Let us pause and think about those who are struggling at this time of year, reach out to others if that’s you. And know that God is with us, in the ups and downs of life, and these in between bits.

## Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> Dec Back to work

... or 'back to normal' if you prefer. Taking down the decorations, putting the tree back in the garage, or taking it to be chipped, Christmas food being finished off, new year over and done with, resolutions broken already, Christmas weight being addressed...

When we have the joy of Christmas, it can come as a shock to get back to normal. Especially if someone is going back to work, to a job they maybe don't enjoy, or maybe those who have to get back to searching for a job.



This year there may be people worrying about their fuel bills too, and it can be easy to 'switch off' at Christmas and try to enjoy the festive season, but then reality sets in and what we've tried to ignore has to be dealt with.

I remember a time when I had a job I didn't really enjoy, it wasn't bad, it was just not very inspiring, and it was hard to be enthusiastic about it. After time off, a holiday away or the Christmas season, it always made me wish for a different job, a better job, and tell myself I must do something about it this year, I must get my act together and seek something more than this. And suddenly Christmas would be there again and another year had gone by. It's easy to let time overtake us, I'll do it next week, next month... suddenly a year has gone by.

And at Christmas we can ignore issues we need to think about, we put them out of our minds because, well it's Christmas, and we are going to enjoy ourselves... I'll worry about it later.

It can be easy to put things out of our minds at Christmas, we can try to forget about difficult things because at Christmas, 95% of the country is focused on that one thing, and we imagine how nice it would be not to have to think about that difficult thing we have to deal with. Whether it's going back to work, finding new employment, or other occupations – volunteering, looking after grandchildren when parents go back to work – it can be hard to 'get back to work', but life goes on after Christmas,

Christ is still with us even if the tree is down, and Christ understands about the stresses and strains of life, the joy of Christmas, and the slump of January. Pinching a slogan from elsewhere – Christ is for life, not just for Christmas!

## Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> Dec Thank you letters

I have a brother and sister and until I was 14 was blessed to know three grandparents. This was fortunate when it came to opening Christmas presents – one grandparent, armed with paper and pencil, was assigned to one grandchild to keep a record of what was in each present and who had given it. And we have done exactly the same with our children. The purpose – so that there is a list ready to write thank you letters.

I have to confess that writing thank you letters was my least favourite part of Christmas, there were always better things to be done. And as a parent it wasn't always easy to encourage our children to approach this task with any degree of enthusiasm. And yet I believe that taking the time to write writing thank you letters was, and is, good discipline for us all.

Cast your minds back to April 2020 and the early weeks of the pandemic. What did we do on a Thursday evening at 8pm? We stood on our doorsteps and applauded our NHS workers to say thank you. We were encouraged to put thank you signs on our bins for the refuse collectors, or on our doors for the delivery people who put a parcel on the doorstep, rang the bell and retreated to a safe distance. We began not to take things for granted and to say thank you to those who helped us.



But now, as things are moving into a new pattern of normal, I just wonder if we have taken two steps back, and we are again inclined to take things for granted. We moan if our bins are left untidily, rather than thanking the people who empty our bins through the worst of the winter weather. We grumble if it takes 3 days for a letter to arrive or if our supermarket shelves are empty. Our son was at a football match recently and made a point of thanking the stewards and police officers, people who had made it safe for the crowd.

Joyce Meyer says this, "It is so easy to forget how blessed we are! That's why maintaining an attitude of gratitude is something we need to do on purpose." She suggests that as we go about our day, we make a point to be grateful for the things we may otherwise not even notice. What a great challenge for us all! As we head towards 2023, maybe our resolution could be notice the things we take for granted and to foster an attitude of gratitude. If it helps, find yourself a diary or a notebook and each evening write a thank you letter to God –

Dear God,  
Thank you today for  
....  
Amen

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his love endures for ever.

*Psalms 118 v 1*

## Friday 30<sup>th</sup> Dec Unwanted Gifts

Years ago, I received a Christmas present that, on first glance, appeared rather bizarre. I like blue, I've always liked blue (it was the only thing I liked about school – that the uniform was blue!) and I don't like pink. I like bags with pockets and compartments. Even though I can't find anything, I still like to pretend to be organised by putting things in pockets so I'll remember where they are.

One Christmas, my sister bought me a strange gift. It was a plastic bag, pink, with no pockets. It was quite large, shiny (I think it was supposed to be patent leather) but in fact it looked plastic, cheap and I hated it. I had to work really hard to pretend to like it. She'd told me she'd got me this great present and I was going to love it. I was really excited and intrigued, so come Christmas Day, I unwrapped a pink plastic bag with no pockets, I was gutted. But Anne was thrilled, she loved it and I had to put on an Oscar winning performance so she would not be hurt.

Later, I talked to my eldest sister, and she mentioned the bag. She had tried to talk Anne out of buying it, but Anne was sure I'd love it. And the reason she thought I'd love it was because she thought it would help me carry all my books and notepads that I was using as I began my local preaching course.

Now what she didn't know was that I studied at home and my tutor came to me when we were working, and when I went preaching I didn't have to take loads of stuff with me, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that she had thought about what I needed to help me.



Anne has not been to church for about 40 years, and she doesn't understand why I do what I do for a living, but she did know that it was important to me, and that was what mattered to her. When I began to understand that and appreciated her care for me, I came to love that bag.

I must admit that I don't use it very much when I'm out and about, but it is used at home, I keep the books I use most when I'm preparing services in it, so I know where my 'go to' commentaries are. So although it started out in my mind as a rubbish present, it has now become a beloved reminder of sisterly love. So if you get a present this Christmas and you wonder 'why did they buy me *this*?' take a second to think, who's it from, why did they think you'd like it, what do they want you to use it for? It's probably a gift that's come from a place of love.

## Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> Dec Gift Vouchers

I used to think it was just the lazy option, but there's a lot of pressure in picking the right gift voucher for the right place! I'm learning there's a degree of skill in picking the right voucher for the right person for spending in the right place. I've learned that because of the number of vouchers that I still have lying around that I've not got round to spending 5+ years later!

Last Christmas I got a gift voucher for an experience day that entitles me to three laps of a race track in the 1960's Adam West Batmobile. It took me a while to get round to redeeming the voucher, and when I did I discovered that I'll still have to wait until March to actually get behind the wheel.

I also discovered all the extra things I'd need to pay for, including the lap with an expert beforehand to find the best driving lines (and save wasting one of my precious three!), and the extra insurance that means I won't have to sell a child to for repairs if I damage the car in any way. Add to that the cost of getting to the track and the pub lunch that will be required to really round off the experience, and it's coming in at me spending substantially more than the gift giver on *their* gift to *me*!



Redemption. That's what happens when we cash in gift vouchers. It's "the action of regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing a debt." It's also a term we use in Christianity to try and understand who Jesus is and his work on the cross.

Isaiah 59 prophesies the coming redeemer whose work will regain people, purchasing them back from sin. The traditional understanding is that Jesus, as redeemer, is clearing the debt of sin. The voucher? That's his birth, life, death and resurrection.

The thing I've noticed is this: There aren't any hidden extra costs that come from "cashing in" on the "voucher" offered by God through Jesus though. Everything is covered. Life is offered in exchange for the very model of Jesus, and it is a gift for whoever accepts the offering.

Even the life we are called to live after receiving and redeeming the gift is more of a blessing than an extra expense. And as we share that life with others it really is the gift that keeps on giving.

## Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> January Resolutions



Many people do not make a New Year's resolution because it is usually hard to achieve. According to a 2016 study in America, a quarter of those who make a New Year's resolution fail after 1 week; 36% fail after a month, and 64% fail after half a year. However, of those people who have similar goals but do not make a resolution, only 4% succeed after half a year\*. So, we are far more likely to reach our goals if we make a New Year's resolution than not.

The Bible records that when the Israelites returned to their homeland after seventy years of exile, they were reluctant to rebuild their Temple because the rebuilding work seemed way too difficult. Then, God spoke to them through the prophet Zechariah (4:10), "*Do not despise small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin*". I wonder whether you have anything that you would like to achieve in life but being put off year after year, or because it seems way too difficult for you? I know I have, many things!

You may want to get healthier and exercise more, or pray and read your Bible more, or write a book, or start a new hobby or try out new ways of volunteering. Whatever it may be, it's never too late to make a start. Even though we may fail after a month or six months, we are still closer to our goals than if we never made a start.

So, I do recommend to make a New Year's resolution and see how far you can go. The best time to plant an oak tree is one hundred years ago, but the second-best time is today. Any small beginning is better than never.

\*Source from Discover Happy Habit Website (2022)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zundjUFazfg>

# ADVENT

As you come to the end of this series of reflections we hope that it has been an enlightening journey, one that you have not made alone but alongside all those other people across the NNE circuit and beyond who have been travelling with you day by day.

We hope that as you have journeyed you have discovered that the new kingdom of God that Jesus came to bring into being has room for all.

- Room for those who are different
  - Room for creation and nature
- Room for the most unexpected of people
- Room for folks from all levels of society
  - Room for you and me
  - Room for the Divine

If your appetite has been stimulated by this Advent adventure then the circuit staff team hope that you will join us again in Lent as we are hoping to produce another series of reflections. Until then may you all have

The grace of Mary

The understanding of Joseph

The hospitality of the inn keeper

The joy of the angels

The enthusiasm of the shepherds

The perseverance of the Magi

And the peace of the Christ child this Christmas.

## And A Final Thought...

This Advent as the cost of living soars and fuel poverty bites hard, why not, if you can, engage with the reverse Advent calendar whereby each day you put an item of food into a box / bag that can be then taken to your local food bank on Christmas Eve.

