

St. Marks – Traditional Carol service 2018

I don't know about you but I love preparing for Christmas: the decorations, the sending and receiving of cards and the buying and wrapping of presents. And as Christmas day draws nearer that sense of anticipation gets ever stronger, especially as a minister with all the services and events I'm involved in. But my favourite day of all is actually Christmas Eve. It was fun when our children were small, but today it's just as good with so many excited faces here at St. Mark's for crib services. It's like there is an electricity in the air - magical. Anyone else feel Christmas Eve is the most magical moment?

Now I've felt this ever since I was a relatively small boy and I think it's because, if I'm honest, Christmas Day at home rarely lived up to expectations. Let's start with presents. Harriet Stowe a famous American author once said "There are worlds of money wasted at this time of

year in getting things nobody wants” - that was in 1880! Today - I don't know how they get this figure, but apparently in the UK there are 115million unwanted presents given which cost in total £2.2 billion to buy. Apparently eBay's busiest day of the year is 29th December which is the peak moment for advertising your unwanted gifts - and they fetch several million pounds every year. From childhood, whilst I had loads of those presents I wanted, what always stuck in the memory were those gifts that were so dull, but you had to say thank you and sound grateful. I remember the Christmas I was anticipating a Disney annual and opened the book-shaped present to find... a children's encyclopedia! Bless my parents - they wanted to buy educational presents and the encyclopedia fitted the bill, but I wasn't impressed. I did say thank you, but my parents saw through my pretence. So they hid the book away for a rainy January day when I was bored and then it re-emerged. I was still unimpressed and thereafter it lurked

in my bedroom cupboard, despite my mum's continual suggestions of "why don't you look in that encyclopedia - there are loads of interesting facts in there". And it took years before my parents admitted defeat and gave the unwanted gift away. Mind you my disappointment was nothing compared to the year my brother had convinced himself that my parents were going to get him his beloved pony Trigger from the local stables and of course Trigger never appeared. The go-kart though great, didn't measure up. Today approaching my 50th birthday disappointing presents are usually shower gel and socks. Any sympathy here from any of the men!

Disappointing presents... But then even when I got what I wanted still it was often unexciting. The year I needed a new tennis racquet my parents could have wrapped the present perhaps with a little more imagination - the handle was hanging outside the wrapping. A tennis racquet was great, but not much use on Christmas Day!

But there are other disappointments beyond the presents... how about the relatives - who we greet with open arms, but by the time they go everyone breaths a collective sigh of relief - phew survived another Christmas with Aunt Doris and Nanny! George Burns once said “Happiness is having a large, loving, caring close-knit family....in another city!”

And finally the food. I love my Christmas dinner, but I always overeat and then I feel bloated. The Holbrook Club must love January - I bet gym membership goes up because I always see way more joggers post-Christmas than before.

And in preparing for what we hope will be the perfect day, but knowing full well that a miserable relative, a sick or disappointed child, or any number of other things can spoil the day, so many people find Christmas all too

much. They say it is the season to be jolly but over 70% of all under 50s say it is incredibly stressful.

So let's look for cheer in the story of Jesus' birth. And there is plenty of that, but first let's not wrap the story up in tinsel and pretend all was lovely. A small child studying the nativity scene in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge was asked to look at Joseph's face and tell the guide what he thought Joseph was thinking. The young boy piped up "I know what my Dad would be feeling if he'd been told that his wife was having someone else's baby!" A shrewd observation. Joseph had planned to divorce Mary when he found she was pregnant, and it was only the intervention of an angel that stopped him. But he can't have been that excited on the journey to Bethlehem. Then there was Mary herself who had certainly not been expecting to be expecting, and certainly she can't have been thrilled to find out it wasn't going to be a home delivery in

Nazareth, but one following a long, uncomfortable journey to Bethlehem. And to cap it all off there was no maternity suite awaiting her arrival either - just a messy stable and an animal feeding trough for a crib. Disappointment stalked the holy family.

And even God himself faced disappointment. In our reading from John's Gospel just before this talk, we hear these words:

“He (Jesus) came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him”

God the Father must have shaken his head to see people reject His Son...

But that is where the disappointment and any connection to our somewhat underwhelming Christmases ends. Because that 1st Christmas which promised so little delivered abundantly more than could possibly have been imagined...

Out in the fields shepherds had encountered angels who sang the praises of God and told them the longed-for Saviour of the world had just been born in Bethlehem - the Messiah who was also God. And when the stunned shepherds hurried down they discovered baby Jesus. The Bible tells us they spread the word about the Saviour they'd seen, and returned to the fields glorifying and praising God for all they had seen.

*Hail thou ever blessed morn,
Hail redemption's happy dawn!
Sing through all Jerusalem,
Christ is born in Bethlehem.*

And wise men from the east had travelled a huge distance following a mysterious star which had appeared signifying the King of the Jews, the Messiah, had come. They travelled it is believed perhaps 1000 miles to see the new born King, and when they arrived they bowed down before Jesus and presented their gifts - gold for the King of Kings, frankincense signifying this child was

the one who makes us right with God and myrrh because he would die to save us from our sins. They too would have left in awe and wonder.

O come, let us adore Him,

O come, let us adore Him,

O come, let us adore Him,

Christ the Lord!

And Mary and Joseph, for whom this had promised to be a very tough time, whose marriage was hardly starting as they'd expected, would have been overcome with all this. The Bible tells us **“Mary treasured up all these things...”** What had seemed like it was shaping up so badly had turned out to be extraordinarily wonderful.

So what about Christmas for you and I? Well I pray your earthly Christmas goes well and lives up to expectations, but even if it doesn't the ultimate Christmas story provides a truth no amount of human disappointment can destroy. After that voice revealing God's

disappointment that some people rejected Jesus, the introduction to John's Gospel continues:

¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Jesus was the greatest gift ever given; God's love came down in human form to restore our lives and bring us the greatest joy and wonder of all. And today we can still embrace the gift of Christ for ourselves. The former Bishop of Durham Tom Wright says of Jesus:

“The Son of God became the son of man so that children of men might become the children of God.”

We move out from the darkness of this world with all its uncertainties and disappointment when we live in the light of Christ - the true light that gives light to everyone.

And when 2019 arrives and Christmas Day is but a memory, the gift of Jesus is still here for you. Will we receive Jesus and follow Him? Perhaps you want to know more about what it means to receive Jesus - well you could join us in January at The Holbrook Club when we run the Alpha Course to explain more. The details are all on the card on your seats - we'd love for you to join us. But for now let's pause and reflect on the greatest Christmas gift, a gift which will never need returning and satisfies our greatest need:

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still
The dear Christ enters in.

Amen.