

**Christmas Day,
Saturday, 25th December 2021**



Dear Friends,

‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’
(John 1:5)

Christmas is a time of gifts and stories; of giving and receiving. This Christmas morning, along with millions of Christians across the world, we come together and give thanks to God for his greatest gift to us – His love. Jesus Christ ‘*Emmanuel*’ becomes ‘God with us’ here on earth - present in human form and ready to share with us what it truly is to be human.

We remember how Jesus came to suffer with us and for us as one of us. Christmas is also an opportunity to give thanks and praise to God for so many other rich gifts: the blessing of our loved ones, our family and friends; our homes, our villages and our worshipping communities, among them. It is also a poignant time - of remembering loved ones no longer with us, especially as we traverse our second precarious Christmas mired by Coronavirus.



Though, whilst we are steeped in this season of great potential for the sharing of love and joy, Christmas can also be fraught with un-met expectations, un-fulfilled promises ... and uncooked turkeys!

I went to Tesco late on Wednesday night, as has been my habit during the Pandemic. Usually, my nocturnal adventures at Winnall are a relatively jolly affair, with like-minded shoppers keen to avoid crowds offering each other a respectful distance, and staff replenishing shelves listening to music or amiably chatting over masks to passers-by as they work. This night however, it was difficult to navigate my trolley through monolithic towers of stacked boxes of goods waiting to be stocked onto shelves. The anticipated landscape was jagged with cardboard. Piles of household goods and foodstuffs blocked walkways, waiting to be stowed in refrigerated shelving - engulfing staff, lost from view as they stacked; their hands gloved against the artificial cold.

'So this is Christmas?' bemoaned a pop song, faltering over the PA system. I was reminded of C S Lewis' rather Scrooge-like comment in his reflection on Christmas 1957, *'Can it really be my duty to buy and receive masses of junk every winter just to help the shopkeepers?'* How prescient to our own times as shops, bars, restaurants, theatres and many more besides rail against anti-Coronavirus restrictions which threaten livelihoods in this peak consumption 'free for all' known as Christmas.

Bah Humbug Mr Lewis! I wonder what he would have made of my experience of watching daytime TV whilst I've been off sick. On a Christmas food programme *'The Best Christmas Food Ever!'* which carries the superlative strapline, *'Christmas is all about pushing the boat out ...'* I witnessed celebrity, Dominic Smallwood, saying to chef, Paul Ainsworth, *'Christmas Day potatoes! Getting them perfect has become my religion!'*



Far from offering viewers ultimate fulfilment, this programme's Christmas message had become reduced to a superficial construct defined by a material world. Tantalised by the promise of immediate gratification and fraught with the possibility of failure, we who watch are caught up in a whirl of perfect visual confectionery yet left bereft of spiritual wholeness and refreshment. Christmas without Christ – what is to celebrate? Needless to say I switched channels at this point!

By direct contrast, the Holy Bible offers us a rich heritage of 'God with us' on which to feast, as witnessed and recorded by the Patriarchs and Prophets of our Church: faithful men and women, without whom we would have no knowledge of the real story of Christmas today.



'Adoration of the Shepherds' by Matthias Stomer

The bible is a record of all that God has done for us through signs and wonders, and through individuals who have said 'Yes!' to God: The grace-filled, unequivocal 'yes' of Mary; the brave, trusting 'yes' of Joseph; the eventual conviction of Zachariah; the great witness of John the Baptist and the sacrificial 'yes' of Stephen are all great gifts to us as we too prepare to respond to God's call in our own lives.

At Christmas, we stop to remember that the coming to earth of Jesus is the most important event in human history. What God has been saying through the Prophets and the Law, He now says in person. Jesus Christ is God himself; the living word. Nativity stories told through the gospels of Matthew and Luke define Jesus' reality and his Kingship. They reveal Jesus coming to us as a vulnerable baby, bringing the power of God's peace and light into a fearful and fragile world.

The Gospel of John nails both the genealogy and the mystery of Jesus by taking us back to the beginning of time. John wants us to know that the coming of Jesus is as significant as the creation of the world. He is saying: *'If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus!'* John guides us to Jesus, describing Him as *'The Light of the World,'* and contrasts that light to the darkness of our human condition. Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace comes to set us free from poverty, war and injustice through love.

The sad thing is that people still don't understand who Jesus is. We shelve the Christ-child and lose the greatest of gifts in a frenzy of tinsel and complicated menus. For many in our material world, Christmas day marks THE END: the culmination of months of preparation, shopping and cooking, stress and expectation. Paying off credit cards is the only thing to look forward to.



'The Manger' by Mike Moyers

Yet all God wants us to do this Christmas is receive His gift to us in Jesus and believe! Far from being the end, for Christians, this season marks an exciting new beginning: Filled with promise, new life and hope. The Good News of Jesus' birth draws us freshly to Him each Christmas and brings meaning to our lives. To mis-quote therapist Charles Dederich, *'This Christmas Day is the first day of the rest of our lives.'* Surely now, more than ever, God is calling each and every one of us to proclaim the Good News of Jesus' birth and to share His message of love and peace!

This Christmas, however luxurious our starter or delicious our dessert, we are wise to remember that our sumptuous Christmas feast is but one meal. Sooner or later we will be hungry again. Yet the sure and certain love of God in Christ Jesus is eternal and will fill us up forever. Jesus is our gift this Christmas: our eternal banquet. He is our story. He defines our lives and guides us into the Light of His Life; into our future.

So, let me wish you all a Happy Christmas! Not just any old Christmas – not even the ultimate roast potato laden Christmas, but a *'God-with-us'*, Christ-filled Christmas, that will sustain you and nurture you and feed you for eternity.

Today, let us rejoice – for in Christ - here Love is!

Jax
Rector, The Downs Benefice

Prayer for Christmas Day – The Birth of Christ

As the prophets promised so long ago, you have come to us once again;
and with the shepherds, we are filled with wonder and amazement.

Lord Jesus, you come as a tiny, fragile baby;
yet we know that you are God and you are with us.

May the flame of this candle remind us that you are the light of the world
and that if we follow you, we will never walk in darkness,
but will have the true light of life.

Amen.



Collect Prayer for Christmas Day

Lord Jesus Christ,
Your birth at Bethlehem
draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth:
Accept our heartfelt praise
as we worship you,
our Saviour and our eternal God.
Amen.



John 1:1-14 - The Word Became Flesh

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.