

## CHRISTMAS DAY 2014, PORTSMOUTH CATHEDRAL

Happy Christmas! The banner outside my local pub proclaims: 'Celebrate Christmas here!' Indeed, and also in church I want to add, tempted to add graffiti, and in compassion, solidarity, generosity with others. It's great to be together this morning for this wonderful celebration, as we rejoice that Jesus has come among us as a new born baby, and give thanks for the love that God shows us. For many, it's a time when families come together, enjoy each other's company, share in the quirky family traditions that bind us together, and take a much needed break from the demands of work and the routines of life.

But at the risk of sounding ever so slightly grumpy and unfestive, although I love being with my family and the good food and wine and the glorious carol services we enjoy here in the cathedral, the actual Christmas presents we give and receive can give rise to slightly mixed feelings. For a start there are less of them under the tree than I imagine there are for the children among us – certainly no exciting new toys or bikes or computer games. I feel my age a bit this morning. And then there's the anxiety of giving presents. Unless, as thank goodness is the case in my family, you get precise instruction exactly what presents to buy and what to avoid (my children often even send me the web link to be absolutely sure that I don't make any mistakes!), there's always a slight niggling worry that I might have chosen the wrong thing, or that I haven't understood someone's tastes.

Christmas can be a time of huge joy. But for some people, the celebrations of Christmas, and the joyfulness of the season, mask a more complicated reality that goes well beyond concerns about Christmas presents. Statistics suggest that more people file for divorce after Christmas than at any other time of the year. The celebrations, the giving, the time together, can bring conflicts to a head, and cause huge unhappiness. And for those who have lost loved ones, through death or through separation, pain of loss can be all the sharper today. In times of sorrow or stress, those TV programmes showing happy families having a great time can make everyone feel inadequate.

It might seem strange that the "season of goodwill" can bring such hurt. But this is something the church has always understood – in fact it's something the Christmas story actually teaches us. Christians believe that God showed his love for us, by giving us the greatest gift possible – the gift of Jesus his son. That gift was received enthusiastically by many – by the shepherds and the wise men who travelled miles to see the newborn baby, and by the angels who came down from the heavens to sing. But for other people, this gift was totally unwanted, and even threatening – people like King Herod, who saw the baby Jesus as a threat to his power, and tried to kill him. In no time at all this little family were refugees.

So the Christmas story is one of both deepest joy and profound sadness. We must name that, not gloss over it, before we can speak the joy and pray the hope of Christmas. The pattern of these days of Christmas reflects that. Tomorrow is St Stephen, the first martyr's day, Saturday's celebration is upbeat again as we remember St John the gospel writer, while on Sunday we remember the baby innocents slaughtered by the fearful and ruthless Herod. This is a story of love offered and gladly received, and of love rejected. As Christians, tempting as it is to become caught up in the feast and the festivities, it is also incumbent upon us to be alert to those people who are hurting deeply, and indeed to be gentle and attentive to our own hurts and the hurts within our own families at this time of the year. As we share gifts, we need to remember that the gifts brought to the baby Jesus included frankincense for holiness and the embalming oil myrrh, as well as gold. Today, alongside our wealth and joy and thanksgiving, we offer up to God our hurt and the hurt of

our community, knowing that all these gifts give equal delight to God, and that we are welcome just as we are at the crib.

Whether you are enjoying a time of celebration, or whether you find yourself in a place of struggle or anxiety or sadness, I wish you a holy and blessed Christmas. And I pray that as in prayer you kneel at the crib, you may receive afresh the gift of God's love.

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