

Happy Christmas – it really is a wonderful morning.

I don't know about you but I have already had two Christmas Dinners. One about two weeks ago for our clergy Christmas party, and then on Thursday when I was at Laurence's Larder, our local foodbank which we support as a church community. Because of the virus I have had I hadn't been for a few weeks and so I didn't realise that it was Christmas Dinner until I arrived. They had set up the room like a real Christmas Family dinner, and then people filled a plate and sat and ate. And some talked and shared stories. For many, it would be their only Christmas dinner, and when I left at 1 O clock they had served over 80 dinners.

One of the things which constantly amazes me when I am at the foodbank and chatting with the guests is the hope that they hold onto. Last night at Midnight Mass I talked about how Christmas is a time of good news and how we need to share more the stories of hope we have in our lives. The homeless I have met are very good at this. Despite all that seems hopeless about the situations which many of them are in, there are many (not all) who don't focus on what is not, rather on what they have. Even on Thursday I spoke with a young man I now know quite well, who has been working hard to rebuild his life. He received notice this week he is to be evicted from the room he is living in because his landlord will make more money on the commercial market than through housing benefit. He said, its OK, I have slept rough before and they can't evict me until winter is over, and in spring the outdoors is quite nice. And then he talked about how he had been saving a little every week and buying one thing to put into the cupboard for Christmas, which he will have alone – a day of his favourite things. He was really looking forward to Christmas.

He shared his story, the tough and what for him is good news – a Christmas Day of his choosing in which he is in control of his life.

It made me think about Christmas's I have loved and ones that have been less fun. I haven't always liked Christmas, I found the expectations stressful, and the heat awful – and the pressure that everything had to be perfect overwhelming. But a few years ago, I was drawn back to a memory of my child hood which helped me let go of some of that pressure and see Christmas for what it is – messy!

I was thinking of that memory again this week when we were sharing stories at the food bank.(And I think I have shared it with some of you before). I guess it must have taken place more than 30 years ago. It was hot – over 30 degrees, and we were all at my grandmother's for Christmas lunch which was supposed to be promptly served at 1pm – but most of us were late. We couldn't all fit in the kitchen so my grandmother had taken all the furniture out of the back bedroom (The largest room

in the house) and filled it with tables. The problem was once all 32 of us were in the room, stretching over 4 generations – no one could move. I remember the only moment of silence was when my Uncle Gordon stood to say grace – (A quote from Robert Burns)

*“Some hae meat and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it,
But we hae meat and we can eat,
And sae the Lord be thankit.”*

the only time in the year we prayed together as a family. And then the chaos really began as food was passed, people were squashed and stories were told. In the end the boys would climb in and out of the window for a smoke or to retrieve more beer! This Christmas lunch was hot and uncomfortable, and chaotic and fun! There were stories from every corner which continued throughout the afternoon. As I look back on this day from over 30 years ago, I realise that on that day my family gave me a glimpse of what the church of God is like. A community of people, across many generations, with many stories and experiences – sometimes fun and sometimes squashy and uncomfortable – but most importantly – a community that is joined together around the love of God and the sharing of that good news! And for one of the first times in my life I have realised Christmas is not a time to be hated, or to be perfect, – for it is the time more than any other where we find God in all time and space – across all generations, and in the mess, and squash and sometimes the uncomfortable – just like Jesus birth in a stable.

No act of God in time and history gives us more reason to hope than the birth of Jesus. At the right time and in the most undeniable and unforgettable way, God becomes human and dwells amongst us. God comes to share in our humanity so that we might have a glimpse, even the smallest glimpse of God’s divinity. In the birth of Jesus - the word of God becomes flesh and lives amongst us. Jesus did not come so that we could have a Christmas Card perfect life – Jesus came into the fullness of our humanity – into its chaos and squashy moments, as well as its moments of joy and love – so that we might also see what God is like! In the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus we receive a permanent glimpse of God, and in him we came to know more about God than has ever been known, before or since. And this glimpse of God shines a light of hope through all generations.

Many people are often surprised by this reading from John’s Gospel at Carols Services, or even Christmas Services because it doesn’t describe the nativity story as we know it. John does not offer details of how and where. There is no manger scene, no adoring shepherds, no wise men from the East, just the incredible announcement that God has become like us in Christ so that we can become like him. In this event we come to an understanding of the nature of God that exceeds any previous

understanding. As we turn to this crib we are invited to recognize how important and precious each one of us is to God. Not just now, but through all generations.

This is the gift of the church - in the stories of our lives, our experiences throughout all generations, is the message of God's love - just as we are - in all our humanity; inviting us to share in the Kingdom of God. Or like a family around the Christmas dinner table - we are able to question and explore who we are through our common story.

In this image of Christmas John draws together the wisdom of God and the word of God - that we might have some understanding of what God is doing. John invites us to turn towards this crib - to turn towards Christ and to look into the light. God wants us to leave behind the shadows of darkness - those things which distract us - those things which are causing us pain.

What John tries to tell us though is that the light - the word - is not just for Christmas Day. God invites us to hold on to this gift - to take hold of the light every day. To face all of the things that we might need to live with day to day - with the hope and light of Christ. For this really is the gift of Christmas - that never again will the world be in darkness - for we have known, and can know - God in our midst.

So as we gaze on the crib this Christmas, as we open gifts and share stories with friends and family. As we sit together in this church and remember our stories in this place.

As we talk to each other and ask questions about our journeys.

Let us turn to the light of Christ and relax into its embrace.

Merry Christmas!

Amen