

Happy Christmas – it really is a wonderful morning. Last night, after a joyful Midnight Mass, I went home with my niece Hannah – who is here spending Christmas with me. We poured ourselves a drink and then phoned Australia! For the next hour I heard lots of stories of what people had got for Christmas and what they were up too. This is very different Christmas for our family. It is the first time my parents have not had Christmas in the small country town we all grew up in – instead most have gone to my brothers at Port Macquarie on the mid north coast of NSW. It is always hot there – and there had already been much swimming before lunch! Hannah and I are here – our first Christmas together since she was a baby.

Christmas is such a strange time of expectations from families and society – and often from ourselves! These expectations can be the source of joy, but sadly for many they are a source of stress.

I love the story we read earlier of Zelda and all her expectations about bringing the perfect gift for Jesus. The stress she puts herself under to find the ‘perfect gift’ only to discover that it was the little flower, and the gift of arriving that brings hope and joy to so many.

It makes me think about Christmas’s I have loved and ones that have been less fun. I haven’t always liked Christmas, and in fact for a long time I avoided it as much as I could. 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 realised, as I have shared with many of you before – that actually Christmas is messy – as was the birth of Christ. And that expectations can be changed to nurture hope!

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, as John so clearly tells us in today’s gospel – 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 unrealistic expectations, 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.

Because of Christmas we know that God understands us and our experiences. And as we share with family and friends this Christmas we can be reassured that God does truly understand; as we share together in this church - we have a glimpse that we truly are the object of God's love.

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.

Jan Richardson is a poet and theologian and has written a poem called **How the Light Comes: A Blessing for Christmas Day** . It explores I think the mystery and wonder of this holy day - and of the light it offers to us.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.

What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.

That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.

That it loves
searching out
what is hidden
what is lost

what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.

That it has a fondness
for the body
for finding its way
toward flesh
for tracing the edges
of form
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.
That it will.
That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still

to the blessed light
that comes.

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