

Luke 2.1–7

The Gift

St Editha's Amington

Sunday 17 December 2017

Carols by Candlelight

Christmas

I wonder how your Christmas preparations are coming along this year? The list of jobs is almost endless, isn't it – the complications of organising and arranging family visits, planning meals, putting up decorations, buying gifts, writing and sending Christmas cards – I hope that our carol service tonight is something of an oasis of calm in the midst of all that. These services are an opportunity for us to focus on the reason *why* we go through all that: to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the good and perfect gift of his life, and the good and perfect gift of the life we can all receive through him.

What is prayer?

In my travels around the parish, I meet and chat to a lot of people. Some of them come to church regularly, some of them do not – but most of them tell me that they pray.

In fact, a recent survey suggested that as many as four out of every five people in the UK believe in the power of prayer. That same survey found that over 90% of young adults pray at least some of the time.

In today's world, perhaps it is no surprise to hear that so many people pray regularly – I imagine that most of us here today are among those who do. Whether we are concerned about the big issues of politics, war, disease and famine, or our lives have been rocked by illness or the loss of a loved one, most of us decide to respond by praying.

But what *is* prayer? Some might call it the onset of madness, like talking to yourself or your pet. Others might call it the power of positive thinking, the Christian version of mindfulness (though we were doing it long before it became trendy). Some might say it's a waste of time – why would God listen to *me* anyway?

One of my favourite writers on prayer says that trying to figure out what prayer is, and how it works, is like using a magnifying glass to work out why someone is beautiful. It makes no sense to do that, and it wouldn't work anyway, because to try that is to miss the point of beauty.

The scandal

Instead of *what* is prayer, or *how* does prayer work, the question we really need to ask is this: *to whom* should we pray? And that question is answered at Christmas.

To some it is scandalous, blasphemous even, to suggest that Jesus was God made Man, emptied of his majesty, humbled by his own choice and made completely human, weak and fragile.

How can God be born to a young – *unmarried* – girl named Mary?
How can God be a baby, who needed to be wrapped in cloths?
How can God live at *that* particular time in *that* particular place?
How can God be born in such poverty that he needed to be laid in a feeding trough for farm animals?

And yet, he was. The Christian faith isn't philosophy or a set of religious axioms – it is a story, *his* story, which invites us to join in. Charles Wesley put it like this:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.

From Hark! the Herald angels sing

The Gift

Jesus was a wonderful gift to Mary and Joseph, like any baby is a gift to her or his parents. But Jesus is also a gift to us, today. Jesus means God is with us – that’s what ‘Emmanuel’ means: God is with us. In Jesus God came to live *with* us, *as* one of us. In Jesus God says, ‘You are not alone, for I am with you, *always*.’

The wonderful news of Christmas is that when we pray to Jesus...

- we are *not* talking to empty space, rabbiting on to ourselves,
- our prayers do *not* fall on deaf or uncaring ears,
- his gift of himself to us is *not* dependent on how naughty or nice we’ve been this year.

The gift and meaning of Christmas has nothing to do with Santa, sleigh bells or sacks full of presents. The gift of Christmas is God himself: ‘Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel’.

This gift – of God’s own Son – takes a lifetime to unwrap, but it’s never too early to start. So as you leave the service today you’ll be given one of these cards. You can use them to sign up for daily messages over the Christmas period, to help you think about and explore what it means for Jesus to be Emmanuel, God with us, the most wonderful gift you could receive this Christmas.