

The joy of Christmas by Rev John Castle

A sermon given at the Carol Service on 24th December 2017 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst
(a version was also given at the Midnight Communion Service)

Readings **Genesis 3:8-15, Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:26-38,
 Luke 2:1-20, John 1:1-14**

Introduction

Christmas comes but once a year
and when it comes it brings ...

- Lists of things to do
- Presents to buy
- Meals to shop for
- Children's nativities to attend
- More presents to buy
- Office parties
- Children's parties
- School carol concerts
- More food and drink to be bought
- Rooms to prepare for guests
- Rising stress levels
- Present wrapping to be done
- Buy more wrapping paper
- Check list to see what you've forgotten
- Stress levels at danger level
- Disagreements about food, accommodation, presents, money...
- Last-minute shopping
- Carol service to attend
- Food to be cooked
- Last-minute present wrapping
- Present opening
- Too much eating
- Too much drinking
- Relaxing
- Stress over!
- Good cheer
- Clearing up after it all

Was it all worth it?

And of course for many, the whole thing is punctuated with moments of sadness as we remember someone who is no longer with us.

Christmas is not all a bed of roses, or if it is, the roses have thorns among them.

And yet in the middle of it all we may find moments of peace, an unexpected rush of joy that seems to come from nowhere. Perhaps you've experienced something of that peace and joy in this carol service. I hope so.

So what is Christmas like for you? I have three assistants who are going to model some Christmas headgear for us this evening, each hat representing one way of experiencing Christmas.

First up is the jolly red Santa hat, encouraging us to rejoice and be merry, to celebrate the occasion with family and friends.

But for some, perhaps Christmas is more like the second hat (similar, but black). I used to have one of these with the words "Bah, humbug" on it. The shopkeeper who sold me this one noticed my clerical collar and chose to say nothing! But maybe the black represents not cynicism about Christmas, but just the bad feelings that come with Christmas, the stress, or the sadness.

Or maybe you'd prefer the third hat (red, with Spiderman eyes)? Does Christmas inspire you with a sense of excitement and adventure, new possibilities? As Gabriel said to Mary "with God nothing is impossible".

Some people just love Christmas so much that they'd like it to be Christmas all year round. Others think that once a year is quite enough.

So my question to you tonight is this: If it were possible to have the joy of Christmas all year round without the stress, would that interest you? And is it possible?

Suppose I were to tell you that it *is* possible to have the joy of Christmas all year round without the stress of Christmas? And that the key to finding that joy is right here tonight?

Christmas, of course, is not just about all the things I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. Those are simply the cultural way we do Christmas in our society. In fact, Christmas is not really about those things at all. It's about a profound yet simple truth which the readings and carols in this service have been telling us: that in the birth of a baby 2000 years ago God himself was reaching out to this sad and messed up world and offering peace, love, joy and healing.

The 5th reading from the gospel of John was an attempt to put this into words. Saint John argues that Jesus was the Word of God, the Light of the World, the essence of life, the Son of God himself. By becoming like us he was giving us the possibility of becoming like him.

To those who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:13)

Of course, in once sense we are all children of God anyway – we are created in his image, he is our Father. But John is writing about an even deeper, more personal experience: Each of us can have a personal, spiritual experience of God. We can know the meaning of Immanuel, God With Us, for ourselves. You and I can have a personal relationship with God as our heavenly Father who knows us more intimately than any human being, who understands us, who cares for us, who forgives us when we go wrong, who can bring meaning and purpose to our lives, and who can heal the wounded heart and the broken relationship.

When you discover God for yourself in this way, you will have the joy of Christmas every day, and the grace of God in your life to help you through the stress, the sadness and the confusion of life.

Many people here tonight have experienced something of this for themselves. If that's you, then you have a reason to rejoice at the Saviour's birth. Maybe you've just experienced it a little. In that case I would urge you to press on, to seek more of God's love in your life, through prayer, through worship, through the Bible and through putting your faith into practice.

If you have never experience the love of God for yourself, we would be happy to help you to find it for yourself. In the pews we have some copies of this white booklet, "Why Christmas?" Please take one home and read it. If you wish, you can fill in one of these green cards and leave it in the black box at the back, or give it to me on the way out, and we will get in touch with you in the New Year to see how we can help you in your quest to know God for yourself. Or you can e-mail me at this address:

rector@stmichaels-sandhurst.org.uk

Christmas comes but once a year. Perhaps this Christmas is the right time for you to decide to find more of God for yourself, so that you can know the joy of Christmas every day of the year.

As we sit, let us pray.

Words from some of the carols sung this evening:

O Radiant Dawn, splendour of eternal Light, Sun of Justice,
Come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.¹

His love will hold me, his love will cherish me, love will cradle me.
Lead me, lead me to see him, sages and shepherds and angels;
no place for me but a stable.
*My Lord has come.*²

What though your treasures are not gold or incense?
Lay them before him with hearts full of love.³

God our Father, thank you for revealing yourself to us through your Son Jesus Christ, who became like us so that we could become like you. Help us to hear your voice speaking to us, and make yourself known to us more deeply, we pray. Amen.

¹ O Radiant Dawn (Words: liturgical antiphon; music: James MacMillan (b. 1959))

² My Lord has come (Words and music: Will Todd (b. 1970))

³ Christmas Lullaby (Words and Music: John Rutter (b. 1945))