

The magic of Christmas by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 22nd December 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Carol service readings

Introduction: What do you love about Christmas?

“So here it is, merry Christmas, everybody's having fun”. Some people love Christmas so much they think about it all year. Others hate it. I wonder what you folks here tonight think. Who loves Christmas? Who thinks by and large it's OK? I won't ask those who hate it to put up their hands!

So what do you love about Christmas? A few years ago, a columnist in *The Guardian* gave “Fifty Reasons to love Christmas”¹. Here is a selection from her list:

- You get more party invites in December than the rest of the year put together.
- For a 48-hour period, Baileys becomes a legitimate milk substitute.
- Knackered parents drinking sherry that Santa seems to have inadvertently left behind
- People who obsessively rewatch [Love Actually](#).

We could add others:

- Listening to “Last Christmas” and all the well-worn Christmas chart toppers.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/24/fifty-reasons-to-love-christmas>

- Watching the film *Diehard*, which I understand is the top Christmas movie for many. (I haven't seen it.)
- Small children dressed up for a school Nativity play.
- The excitement of children going to bed on Christmas Eve, eagerly waiting to see what Santa has brought in the morning
- The quiet, moving magic of a carol service.

“Magic” is perhaps the word that best conjures up that indescribable buzz, that ethereal glow that Christmas can bring. Perhaps part of it comes from happy childhood memories that are stirred. Perhaps part of it is seeing the joy on the faces of others, especially children.

But does Christmas have more to offer than an annual shot of nostalgia? Can the magic last beyond Boxing Day?

We've all seen the TV adverts showing happy families sat around a dining table groaning with sumptuous food, with a perfectly decorated tree in the background and wine flowing abundantly, and we know that isn't the whole picture of Christmas. Some of you will have to put up and put up with difficult relatives, or face traffic congestion as you travel long journeys to visit with loved ones. In some households relationships will be strained and goodwill seem impossible to keep up. And some will be spending a Christmas without a loved one whose absence will be painful, looking at photos and laying one less place at the Christmas dinner table.

Religious Christmas cards tend to show idyllic scenes of a stable radiating with light and warmth, with shepherd boys holding cuddly lambs. But the first Christmas wasn't a bowl

of cherries for Mary and Joseph. Imagine arriving in an unfamiliar town after a long journey while nine months pregnant, and finding all the accommodation filled up. A shed with animals is hardly a safe and hygienic place to give birth, with close family far away. The message of Christmas is that the Son of God chose to be born in such a situation, to share the nitty gritty of real human struggles, and grow up in an ordinary family in a very ordinary working-class village. By the time Jesus had grown up, his mentor and teacher Joseph had died. His brothers didn't understand him. The leaders of his own people rejected him and had him cruelly put to death. So how come his birth is still being celebrated 2000 years later?

The story of Jesus Christ has inspired poets, composers, leaders and ordinary people all over the world with a vision of hope, peace and love. His message and his example have led to hospitals being founded, slavery being abolished, child labour being outlawed, and those who were oppressed by social injustice and discrimination finding freedom and dignity. And on a personal level, many have found for themselves the meaning of the name *Emmanuel* – God with us, in prosperity or adversity, in sorrow and in joy.

I think the reason we are all here tonight is because in one way or another, perhaps in some way we find it difficult to put into words, the Christmas story and the way it is expressed through the music of this service is more than magical – I would call it supernatural.

The message of tonight's carol service is that the true magic of Christmas isn't just for Christmas. We may not hear a

choir of angels singing in the sky (we'll have to make do with St Michael's church choir!), but if we do what the shepherds did, and look for Jesus ourselves, what we will find will be the one who can give our lives their ultimate meaning.

I love the last sentence in the story of the shepherds visiting the baby Jesus, and finding it was just as the angel had told them. If you know people who have found Christ for themselves, ask them for directions.

I also love what Luke tells us about Mary. She didn't see the choir of angels, but when she heard about the shepherds' experience, she "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."² My prayer is that as you go away from here this evening you will do the same.

For most of my life I have been a follower of Jesus Christ. There have been good times and difficult times. But I can honestly say that God has never let me down. Jesus' teaching and example have been my inspiration and guide. Every aspect of life is better with him.

In the words of the carol *My Lord has come*, which the choir sang just a few minutes ago,

His love will hold me, his love will cherish me, love will cradle me.

Lead me, lead me to see him...

The message of tonight's service is that my Lord has come. He has come to seek us, to invite us into a relationship with God that will transform the way we see ourselves, others and the world. He can bring healing to broken hearts, mend

² Luke 2:19 NRSV

broken relationships and bring the peace and deep-down joy which we all yearn for, but often seems elusive.

Many here tonight know this from personal experience. Others are unsure, wondering if it is too good to be true. Maybe tonight you are more of an observer, on the edge of faith and looking in. This afternoon after the Nativity service a little girl and her father both said to me on the way out that they'd like to be baptised. If you'd like to find out more about the Christian faith and the true meaning of Christmas, there are a few booklets at the back of church entitled "Why Christmas". Please take one. Or you could fill in the card in the pews and I'll get back to you to see how we can help.

I hope that this carol service has helped you to experience something of the magic of Christmas. But more importantly, I hope that the *mystery* of Christmas has become more real to you: the reality of Emmanuel, God with us. When the Christmas decorations have been taken down, and when life begins to return to normal after all the excitement of Christmas, God will still be with you. His presence can transform our lives, our families, our communities, and our world.