

God shares all our Christmases

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges at 8am on Christmas Day 2019 in St Peter's Wolvercote

Last Wednesday it was my son-in-law's and cousin's birthday. On Friday it was my grandson's birthday. He was six so you can imagine how excited he was in the days and weeks before!

But, of course, birthdays are not really BIRTHdays. There can only be one real birth day, the rest are anniversaries of our birth. So technically, Friday was the 6th Anniversary of Elliot's birth. What a mouthful - no wonder we abbreviate it. But it means that the days leading up to a 'birthday' are a bit of a paradox - because we wait with anticipation and excitement for the birthday of someone who is here already.

During Advent we prepare for Christ's coming, although technically we are preparing to celebrate the anniversary of his birth - because he is already among us. This year during the Advent waiting season, we did a lot of different waiting. Some may have had to wait for the results of medical tests - our own or someone we love. We've all been 'worn down' by the wrangling about Brexit, and we all waited for the General Election results.

But, amid all this, we've carried on with our preparations for Christmas. These preparations will have taken many forms - possibly preparations for cooking a Christmas meal, or to go and stay with others, or buying presents and Christmas cards. For some of us, the preparations can seem a bit of a nightmare. Certainly, one person I know commented how sad they felt at the enormous amount of money spent simply on advertising. We may feel that many people have got Christmas wrong, thinking of it as an excuse to go out and spend money, when it should be about taking more time to remind ourselves of Christ's birth and all that this meant.

Of course, Christmas is about Christ's birth which we celebrate today. But I think we underestimate God's power if we think he isn't present in this, apparently secular, way of celebrating Christmas. I believe that most people's motivation to spend is love. Sometimes we may feel that it's just a question of who can buy the biggest and the most expensive presents, but I believe there's a genuine desire to make Christmas an excuse to show people that we love them. Giving is one way of demonstrating love - whether it's a card, or a present, or hospitality. So I believe that God is there in that desire to show love, by giving.

And what about all this Christmas jollity? Shops play jolly songs and Christmas carols, people sing Christmas carols, many children act out nativity plays. My daughter has no Christian faith, but her son - the 6-year-old, and her daughter, nearly 4, recount with excitement the story of Jesus' birth. When you go out shopping there's an air of festivity, excitement. It's easy to dismiss this as empty or meaningless - that people don't know what they're singing about, but we mustn't. I believe that God is there in that jollity, in those carols, in the excitement. People may not realise it, but something of God's love is rubbing off on them.

And then there's another thing that's a sign of God at work - the fact that people are more generous at this time of the year - in what they give to charities, in what they do for others.

I think that we, in the Church can occasionally get rather snobbish and blinkered about Christmas. We may sometimes say that Christmas should only be about religion, about a professed faith in Jesus Christ, otherwise it's meaningless, empty. But this is surely arrogant, and untrusting. We should never

underestimate the way God works - much of his work is done outside the church and religion. The world may not seem to be a particularly wonderful place sometimes - there are apparently many things to complain and worry about, but it was into this world that God chose to come, in flesh and blood, as a tiny baby to a mother who loved him, and accepted the joy, and the pain, that being a mother brings. God didn't hold up his hands in horror and say 'I can't possibly go there because there's so much wrong'. On the contrary, it's because there's so much wrong that he chose to become part of us. He chose to be part of all those 'wrong' things - the pain, the ugliness, the injustice.

He's in the things we cry about - with all those people for whom Christmas is an enormously painful time - because of bereavement, loneliness, homelessness, illness, or the inability to buy presents for the people they love, or threat of violence or fear for the environment around them. But he's also there in that rush and excitement and commercial business that seems to be Christmas for so many people. He's in the jollity and excitement, the love, the generosity, as well as the caring and comforting and church services, even though most people don't realise it. He is very much there - in all the things we see around us.

Our Advent waiting is now over, and those of us who realise Christ's presence have something extra and very special to celebrate. We can rejoice, give thanks and praise, that God - the God of earth and heaven who created all things - chose to join us in the ups and downs, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, of life on earth, and we know he is with us all through the year, not just for Christmas.

We must take every opportunity we can to remind people what Christmas is truly about - that God loves us enough to become part of our world, and we must take every opportunity we can to witness to God's love and make it real by what we do.

We must also give thanks that he is at work, even in those things we might instinctively think are godless. Nothing is godless. God works in wonderful and mysterious ways, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, and we must never underestimate his gentle power.

Amen