

Christmas Day (or Eve) Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

What does Christmas mean to you? If everyone here answered that question, we would probably get a number of different answers, maybe as many answers as there are people. We variously hear all sorts of theories, it's about the birth of Jesus, well that's a good one for us to consider as we worship in Church. It's about the children, it's certainly about a particular child and that gets lots of other children engaged and excited. It's about sharing goodwill through the giving and receiving of cards and gifts, and there will no doubt be a lot of that going around. It's about Santa, that's what the shops, TV advertisements and Coca-cola corporation would have you believe. It's about family.

None of these interpretations of what Christmas is about is wrong, or misguided, what Christmas is to you is purely about your relationship with this season but we can surmise that there are few who would disagree with the statement that Christmas is about family. Families gathered around a tree, families at parties, families sharing a meal, even where people have no family to share Christmas with we focus on that. Being close to family is to be celebrated, being separated from family is something to bring sadness. So whether you are with your family or away from them at Christmas, family is paramount in our thoughts and our plans.

But this is a church service, surely we should be hearing about Jesus, that's what you're thinking aren't you? Well, of course, Christians think about Jesus, quite a lot of the time actually, but there is room in our thoughts for family too. We are visiting Wales again on Monday to catch up with our family. People often ask those they meet at this time of year, who they will be spending Christmas with. For those with time honoured traditions and in-depth plans, this is wonderful news to share. For others, who may not have family nearby or be estranged from them, or simply have no family or friends to share the celebration with, this question will be difficult to answer.

For those of us who are part of a church community we have the opportunity to spend Christmas eve and/or Christmas Day with a slightly different family, not our earthly, biological family, but our spiritual Church family. The family of brothers and sisters who make up the church, the body of Christ and all call God our Father.

Just like our biological families, we are close to some members and distant from others, we like some members more than others (if we are really honest), some live nearby and others live farther away. We get together as a family far less often than many of us would like, but when we do get together it is always a joyous occasion. We catch up with each other's news, we delight in each other's presence and we connect again with family members we have missed and we go our separate ways confident that we will meet again, soon, and we find our family members span all sorts of ages, ethnicities, backgrounds and experiences and yet each is fully a member.

Sounds like a great family doesn't it? Enough of us agree to make this celebration special, we are each of us a part of this family, whether we worship together weekly, monthly, annually or even less often than that. How did you become a member of this fabulous family? You chose it, nothing more. God reached out his hand that first Christmas when he sent Jesus into the world as a vulnerable baby, and all we have ever had to do since to join his family is to grab that hand, to say yes please, to call him Father and accept that he

loves us so much, so completely that he was separated from his Son for a little while in order that he could be joined again to his human family.

It's not difficult to do but it isn't always easy to keep up either. It's like any family relationship, we sometimes get distracted by the things we want to do that pull us away from our church family, we sometimes don't get along very well with our brothers and sisters and find it hard to meet with them, we sometimes feel that we are not worthy to be members of a family under the guidance of such a great father. But just like in our biological families it is the big family occasions that get us together and offer the opportunity for healing and renewed commitment to the family, so it is with our church family.

We come together with the greatest number of our brothers and sisters on the occasion of Jesus' birth at Christmas and the commemoration of his death and resurrection in Holy Week and at Easter. And just like when we only catch up with some members of our biological families at christenings, weddings and funerals, and yet we remain fully members of those families all the while, so it is with our church family. We are always part of it, our Father thinks of us often and calls us home regularly even if we don't always make it week by week.

So Christmas is very much about family, it is about the Holy family of a child born to a displaced young couple, away from their extended biological family but under the care of their heavenly father. It is about the family that Jesus came to offer us all through grace that we may be brothers and sisters with him under the care of that same heavenly father. It is about the family of the church which continues to be the expression of and witness to God's love for humanity and it is about the families we were born into, those we love and those we find hard to love. It is about the human family, each and every member, like us, a child of God made in God's image. In all these ways Christmas is about family and when we consider Christmas to be a celebration of family first, all the rest falls into place. Of course we show our family how much we love them through cards, gifts, parties and time spent together. Of course we spread a little goodwill as we donate to charity or make up a hamper for the underprivileged as we are part of the same human family, of course we make time to meet with our brothers and sisters in Christ as we gather around our Father's table and share the communion meal together.

May the commemoration of the birth of the Christ child once again inspire you to give thanks for the families of which you are a vital member. May you find joy, peace and hope this Christmas as you share it with members of God's family here and go out with confidence to share the love already shown to you at his birth.