

## St. Lawrence Christmas Day 2017 – 8.00 am Communion sermon (BJH)

It was lovely last Sunday to see Bedmond Church filled just about to capacity for their afternoon Carols and Readings Service. We might perhaps have been able to squeeze another half-dozen or so into what little space there was, but no more. Then, in the evening, it was St. Lawrence's turn and once again a tightly-packed almost full Church.

Then there was yesterday. 5 'Donkey' Services, one after the other, and people virtually having to book to get in. A midnight Service when at any other time of the year people would be huddled in bed to keep winter cold at bay – but no, here they were to sit on hard wooden pews and sing the same songs they sang last year and the year before that. I really don't know how many hundreds will have passed through the doors before Christmas is a thing of the past.

You have to ask - what is it that draws so many people in to everything we do here and in all the other Churches – Carol Services, Christingles, Nativity plays, Midnight Communions and all the rest of it.

Is it simply the fact that it all hinges around the birth of a baby? Commercial enterprises are only too aware of the drawing power of babies and small children – note the number of TV commercials that focus interest and cameras on them. We all know what a distraction babies can be to any gathering. I well remember a conference of Health Visitors, convened for them to demonstrate that their work was eagerly being developed for them to be involved in all areas of Health Promotion work, especially heart disease and cancer prevention. But someone brought a baby! It was amazing to watch how quickly all other aspects of their corporate work receded into the background of their attention!

Is it the thought and sight of children looking bright-eyed and wondering at the sight of the Christmas trees, the donkeys, angels, the coloured lights and all the other magical wonderland things we do and use? Well yes, surely some of that – isn't it always good to see children still being children rather than miniature commercialised and angst-ridden grown-ups?

Is it simply the 'love of all things festive'? Yes, certainly, a strong element of that – although it doesn't seem to bring people along at other 'festive' times in the Church's year; Easter comes close of course, but Epiphany? Pentecost? Perhaps a church-attracting response to Festive seasons is closely linked with whatever business and industry consider commercially significant?

Is it nostalgia? Yes, I'm sure a good deal of that is going on in all our minds at Christmas time; a longing for what our minds tell us was so good about our childhood Christmases, even though our minds do have a knack of getting us to remember the good things more clearly than the less pleasant. Perhaps people find something of the uncomplicated simplicity of bygone days in what we do in Church – if such simplicity ever really existed!

Babies, children, excitement, joy, expectation, nostalgia and a love of all things festive – yes, all of those, I'm sure, do encourage people to come and join us at Christmas, and it's great that people feel welcomed and treasured enough to feel that they want to come back next year and all the years after.

But I think there's more, and I was pleased to read that a Bishop has fairly recently said that he thinks the same after spending quite some time researching into what it is that brings

people in in such numbers. It's a phenomenon he has really studied, and he has come to the conclusion that it has something to do with what we heard in those two readings earlier.

In that letter to the Jewish Christians, Hebrews, the writer says of Jesus "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being...". In that wonderful Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, John – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and lived among us..." Those staggering statements of our belief that the baby in the manger, the boy who argued with rabbis, the man who cured sicknesses and taught us to bring hope and love to everyone, who suffered loneliness, sadness, anger, pain and death – that this very human being was none other than God become a human and going through everything we have to go through simply because we are living creatures. "Hail the Incarnate Deity" how often we've sung those words – and will say much the same again shortly when we say the Creed together – "of one being with the Father". That's the central idea of Christmas, the reason behind all the trappings of festivity – that God was and is so concerned about us and what we are doing to ourselves and to each other as a species that he – God – actually became one of us to show us how to live at our best.

Is that what really attracts people to come and join us at this time of year? Is there a lurking suspicion in many, many minds – perhaps a lurking hope, if nothing else – that there is some truth in what we are saying? I would love to think so.

Because if we've got it at-all right, then it turns out that the God in whom so many quietly believe but who seems to so many to be distant and unconcerned, uncaring about all the suffering and fear that we find is such an integral part of life itself, actually does care; actually is involved; actually is doing something, perhaps in ourselves, to set the world on a course that leads away from destruction, oppression and violence – all those awful things that make the News - and towards love, peace, harmony and gladness.

That's what we believe and proclaim, not only at Christmas, of course, but throughout the year. And if that is what attracts people to come and hear, if that is what people need to hear and if that is the conviction that we have and want to share – then let's find every possible way we can to proclaim that to any who are willing to hear – as well as to those who couldn't care less – not only at Christmas time, but, to use that awful Americanism which has become almost standard – speak – '24/7' (Is time really so short that we no longer have time to say 'all day, every day!)..

Christmas has begun.

Or perhaps it has yet to begin. In the words of the writer Howard Thurman:-

***When the song of the angels is stilled; when the star in the sky is gone; when the kings and princes are home; when the shepherds are back with their flocks; then the work of Christmas begins;***

***to find the lost, to heal those broken in spirit, to feed the hungry, to release the oppressed, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among all peoples, to make a little music with the heart;***

***and to radiate the Light of Christ, every day, in every way, and in all that we do and all that we say – Then the work of Christmas begins.***

Brian Hibberd