

Dear Friend,

Happy Christmas!

My first Christmas Day service in 1990 began with "Come and join the celebration" and my last service on Christmas Day this year, will begin with the same carol. 1990 was my first Christmas in full time ministry and this year will be my last before retirement. So, it is appropriate to begin and end Christmas Day services with this joyful carol. Jane pointed out to me, however, that this year won't be any different from any other of the intervening years! That's not surprising as it is a great way to start celebrating our Saviour's birth.



"Come and join the celebration, it's a very special day; come and share the jubilation, there's a new King born today!" says it all. Today is a day for celebrating as we remember the birth of a new King. Not any king, but the King of kings. Bells ring out to share the good news with the message that "God is with us" in the birth of Jesus, one of whose names is Emmanuel, which means "God with us". Whatever our personal circumstances, may we know the quiet joy which comes from knowing that Jesus was born, died and raised as the King of kings and that we can trust him in all things.

The carol reminds us that the message that "God is with us" goes round the world and "all the bells on earth are pealing" spreading the good news that God's love is for everyone! On that first Christmas night, on the hills round Bethlehem, angels appeared to the shepherds and "they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for *all* the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord", (Luke 2:9-11). The Jewish people had been waiting for God's anointed one, the Messiah, for centuries. The angel tells the shepherd the Saviour has been born. He has come not just for the Jews, but for ALL people. Jesus has come for humble shepherds, for wise men from far away lands, for carpenters, fishermen, farmers, tax collectors, leaders, priests, men, women, children, the rich, the poor, the sick, the prisoners, soldiers, merchants, home owners, refugees, free citizens, slaves, young and old from all nations of the world.

The same is true today. Reflecting on the last thirty-six years, I have seen numerous nativity plays by people of all ages. One, in Cornwall, involved a fraught mother going round with a shopping trolley getting everything ready for Christmas and forgetting all about the birth of Jesus – there was no time for worship! Another, whilst on the coast in East Kent, imagined Mary and Joseph, without anywhere to stay, finding shelter in a boat, which was on the shingle beach. Not so long ago, soldiers carrying machine guns patrolled the streets of Bethlehem to the sound of Simon and Garfunkel's "Silent night" over a war report from Vietnam, sending shivers down the back. Whether in a traditional or modern setting, each nativity play shared the good news that Jesus came for everybody, to bring new life, to bring hope and joy, whatever our circumstances.

The world always needs to hear this message of hope, but this year it seems especially poignant, with news of acts of violence and hatred; wars going on and on; natural disasters happening one after another; and a disturbing rise of extreme right-wing movements across Europe and beyond. I was concerned when I heard that the Unite the Kingdom group held a carol service in Whitehall on 13th December "to put Christ back into Christmas" * I am glad that it went peacefully and

mostly focused on Jesus, rather than politics, but am perturbed by advocacy for “muscular” or was it “masculine” Christianity? Each Church community that I have ever known have always been faithfully putting Christ into Christmas. It has been done in a loving, kind, caring, inclusive way enabling people to see the love of God for themselves in the birth, life and death of Jesus without fear or discrimination.

When we reflect on how God loved us so much that he sent us Jesus, born as one of us, we let his love live in us and change us as we build up our relationship with him. As we trust in him, his peace helps us and he gives us hope as we live through life’s challenges. Our relationship with Jesus is not just for Christmas, but something we treasure, like Mary, and ponder in our hearts throughout the year. As our relationship and love grows, so we show the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit “is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control,” (Galatians 5:22-23). We often struggle with sowing the fruit, but when we fail, we ask for forgiveness and try again. As we live and show the fruit in our lives, so we share the love and good news with others.

Jesus’ birth changes everything and even in the hardest situations gives us hope, knowing that God is with us. So once more, on Christmas morning, we can sing, “Come and join the celebration, it’s a very special day; come and share our jubilation, there’s a new King born today!”

Jane joins me in wishing you a very happy and peaceful Christmas and New Year.

May God bless you with his love, peace and joy this Christmas and always,

Stephen

*For more information visit **What does it mean to truly 'Put Christ back into Christmas'** on the Methodist Church website.