

Being comforted this Christmas

Well it's a bit less than three weeks to go....what stage are you at? Presents bought, wrapped....cards written and delivered...food ordered....

What are the things that you most enjoy at Christmas.....how does it have to be for you to feel that it is right...what are the traditions....

I imagine most of you know the story by Charles Dickens..the Christmas Carol. **SLIDE 1** The story of a miserly old man coming to understand the 'real' meaning of Christmas through a chance to see Christmas in the past, the present and the future; both for himself and for other people....and having his life transformed as a result.....it's a story to warm the heart.....and obviously comes out time and time again in various guises...it fills in all the things that people deep down want to be important, that it is the relationships that matter more than the things; that it is how you share and give that makes a difference...and somehow the Spirit of Christmas produces an atmosphere in which this sort of change is possible.

Christmas does sometimes seem to have that effect....Christmas comfort.... **SLIDE 2** more heart warming stories about how the core of Christmas creates the environment in which all sorts of things are possible ...almost magically so

Christmas is a time of year that for lots of people inspires a feeling that things could be a bit different.... after all it is Christmas..... **SLIDE 3** this nostalgic view is seen on all the television ads to a greater or lesser extent.....warmth...it's always a crisp wintercolour, lots of red and green, lights....and a sense that even in the ads...christmas is a time for people to be together, for relationships to be made right, for people to come home (waitrose ad)

The sense that Christmas should engender **SLIDE 4** feelings of hope joy and peace does lie just beneath the surface of many people's thoughts and aspirations for this time of year, even when they don't really expect that to be the case....because of course alongside those wishful expectations lies a much harsher reality for many....lives are often not changed....or at least not for the better...the stress, the desire for perfection all poured into a short few days fuels unreasonable expectations and leaves many feeling disappointed and cynical as well at the very least.

So should you feel comforted this Christmas? And if so what does it meanand why...?

The reading from Romans that I chose is not a typical reading for advent, but as we look at it I hope you will see that it takes us to the heart of the real meaning of Christmas

These few verses are a heartfelt prayer by Paul for the people he is writing to....it is a prayer that the church be truly the church. That God's people act as if they are God's people....**SLIDE 5**

v 7 welcome one another....as Christ has welcomed you...for the glory of God

one of the problems the church was experiencing at that time was the differences that existed between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians. There were questions being asked by some of the Jewish Christians about how salvation was achieved, and pressure from some of them that Paul points out was adding unnecessary burden to non-Jewish Christians...such as suggestions that all of them should be circumcised as well....have a look at it in chs9-11 if you want to see the discussion in a bit more detail..... for the moment all we need to understand that these differing theological viewpoints were creating the potential for strife and division...and Paul is writing to them at least in part to make sure that it does not happen....and what he does in these few verses is to challenge them to be welcoming of each other....in Christ and because of what Christ has done and to glorify God...the trouble is and it continues to be so today that when we disagree about things we often focus on the apparent divide and fail to look for what unites us.....so Paul looks back to the old testament and sketches out for them in just a few verses God's plan of salvation for the whole world...for all peoples from every race and creed..... **SLIDE 6**

and of course that is why it makes sense as an advent reading...because what we celebrate at advent is the coming of God in human form to keep the promises that were made to the Jewish people in the past.

So reasons to be comforted

God keeps his promises **SLIDE 7**

Christ came to keep God's promise.....the promise that was made all the way back in Genesis to Abraham when he was called and God promised not only to make a nation come from him but that all the people of the earth would be blessed through him...that says Paul means non-Jewish people can also be brought into God's people...

V9

V10

V11

All make the same point...non-Jewish people will also be able to know God and be His people.....

God's promise is kept in Jesus Christ SLIDE 8

V11 quotes the passage from Isaiah that we also read...it points to the fact that Jesus fulfils the requirements that were expected of the Messiah...written many years before....a new life coming from the old kingly line of David.....a new king.....with a new kingdom and a new way of doing things.... God's way.....someone who looks not at externals but internal...someone who has the spirit of God in Him.....Paul is challenging His Jewish readers...look you know this part of the scriptures....can't you see that this Christ who you believe in fulfils the promises of the OT too....and that promise stretches out to all people..... Jesus does stand as a signal to all people... **SLIDE 9**

In the birth of this child...we celebrate the fact that the promises that God has made were brought to the beginning of their fulfilment

So it follows says Paul...just as God in Christ has welcomed you then you should welcome one another....

But it also works as an advent reading because there in the final verse are all the things that people so often want from Christmas..... **SLIDE 10**

V13 may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit

why is it that people associate Christmas time with peace and joy and hope...that desire is there **SLIDE 11** because ever since the first Christmas the story of God pouring Himself into one small baby... has opened the possibility for everyone to know God, and in Him to experience hope, peace and joy...and that drama played out all those years ago...is still a story, God's story.... that catches the imagination and plays at the edges of people's consciousness when they long for Christmas to mean just a bit more than presents, trees lights....

God's promise is still available today SLIDE 12

Paul finishes the prayer asking for the God of hope to fill them with peace, joy and hope....and that is a prayer we can echo for ourselves today. God's promise is still available to us today...we can know God in the person of Jesus....and in that relationship comes the peace, joy and hope that we deep down want

Don't forget...he is writing to a people who live under foreign rule, to a people who will be persecuted for their faith...peace for them is not simply the absence of external fight and division....it is not a joy that comes from external possessions or status or power....and it is not a hope that they can better themselves, it is joy, peace and hope that paradoxically arise from the birth of a child and death on a cross **slide 13**

Rather it is a joy, peace and hope deeply inside their lives that will affect how they live in the middle of poverty, in the middle of pain, in the middle of despair...that prayer is for a dynamic peace, hope and joy...that continue to grow and develop in the power of the spirit as they trust in God...they come from relationship from knowing God..... slide 14

....and the word became flesh and lived amongst us, and we have seen his glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth

Yet in those words is the paradox that the most awe inspiring , most amazing act of God's love is seen in the birth of this new baby....and that roots Christmas as much in human ordinariness as Godly miracle. The incarnation is the story, the act of God taking on flesh and with it the complexity and limitations of humanity; It tells us that the most important thing to happen in history happened in the life of a child, amongst people with no status or position...God here makes Himself part of His creation, the material and human world....in Jesus He is found in the history and physical processes of humanity, in the middle of the mess of our world in the difficulty of our relationships...because He loves us and values us...it is here that time and eternity, earth and heaven, God and man are brought together...light has come into the world..... slide 15

And we can be comforted because the promise is that peace, hope and joy are possible even in the midst of difficulty and despair....the challenge well more of that next week....but surely one challenge at least is to recognise that if we live in a relationship with God...

then we have a responsibility like Paul to pray that we can welcome each other for the glory of God....and to get on and do it....to be determined not to allow the things that potentially divide us to be more important than the wonderful message that we share

we also need to pray for each other that as we trust and grow in faith we will be filled with joy , peace and hope...so that we live as God's people and in doing so demonstrate to everyone that the story we celebrate at Christmas is not simply a warm fuzzy story, which is rather nice....but the point when God breaks into human history and declares the beginning of His kingdom.