

Sermon at St Mary's and online on Sunday 19 December 2021 by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45

So, it's nearly here. In fact, by this time next week it will be all over. Christmas. Are you ready for it?

I have always pretended to be like Scrooge when it comes to Christmas - you know, "Bah humbug, when will this dreadful time be over?" But it's not true, really, Christmas in different ways, has provided me with a lot of joy over the years, as I know and hope it does for you as well.

Christmas for a lot of people is steeped in family traditions - doing much the same thing with the same people at the same time every year. And there's a lot to be said for the comfort of a routine like that. It's reassuring, in a way.

For me, there has never really been a Christmas routine; over the years, every Christmas seems to have been different for one reason or another.

OK, maybe when I was young and living at home, there were certain traditions. We never put up the decorations or dressed the tree until Christmas Eve. That would be unheard of these days, when Christmas decorations start appearing in the shops after August Bank Holiday. But we never rushed it. The tree went up, as my mother cooked mince pies in a steamy kitchen,

listening to the carol service from Kings College on the radio. We always went to Midnight communion as a family, even when I was still young enough to believe in Father Christmas. I would always pretend that I'd seen him passing across the midnight sky going home.

In the morning, the day would start early with a hunt for sugar mice that had been hidden by Father Christmas in the most ingenious nooks and crannies around the house. My Dad would go and fetch our great aunt; we would open our presents, have a traditional turkey lunch. My sister and I would do the washing up, while the grown-ups fell asleep watching the Queen's speech (apologies, your Majesty) and then I would slip up to my bedroom to start reading one of my new Christmas books.

Does that sound familiar to most or some of you?

After I'd left home, things changed of course. I worked as a hospital porter for two years after leaving college and would always volunteer to work on Christmas Day. There was a great camaraderie throughout the hospital and, by 10.00 o'clock in the morning, the nurses in every ward would have opened a bottle of sherry and a box of chocolates, and I would finish my shift always feeling a little tipsy and fat.

After I got married and had my own children, we created our own traditions. These, of course, included setting out a mince pie and a glass of whisky by the chimney on Christmas Eve for Father Christmas and a plate of carrots and a saucer of milk for the reindeer. And then rushing down early in the morning before anyone was awake to make sure the carrots had teeth

marks and there was mud on their saucer of milk. And the children squealing with delight: *He's been, he's been.*

After the children had grown up, I took the opportunity to work for Crisis for a couple of years, caring for homeless people and rough sleepers in one of the Crisis hostels in London over the Christmas period. That was a very different Christmas, but still full of joy in its own way.

And that's the thing that I have always been lucky to feel at Christmas: a sense of delight, of enjoyment, of purpose and hope. As a Christian, I have never lost sight of the real meaning behind the birth of Christ in this world, and I have usually felt the presence of God at work in most of my Christmas experiences.

But I know that I am lucky; I know that it is not the same for everyone.

Christmas can be a very sad time, a very lonely time, it can be a time of desperation for many people. I've already mentioned the homeless; people living on the breadline, not being able to afford to give their children comfort and joy; people in hospital who aren't able to have a glass of sherry with the nurses or their family; people who are reminded that there is an empty chair around the table.

The charity that I work for now is busy distributing medicines and humanitarian aid to parts of the world where it's going to be a very difficult for people to have a joyful Christmas - sub-Saharan Africa, Sudan, Ethiopia; refugee camps in the Middle

East, conflict zones such as the Yemen, regions such as Haiti that are recovering from natural disaster and, of course, Afghanistan.

Last year proved very difficult for many families in this country because of the COVID restrictions and even this year there is a worry that the law may suddenly be tightened at the last minute and spoil everyone's plans.

But even in the difficult Christmases, even in the hard Christmases, God will be at work.

That is why I like this morning's gospel reading. I know it's set several months before the birth of John the Baptist and the first Christmas. But here we listen to two women who are talking and supporting each other in what must have been, in practical terms, difficult situations.

Elizabeth was an older woman, supposedly too old to bear children, but she seemed to be overcoming the physical difficulties of that. Her husband had lost the power of speech since an angel of the Lord had told him his wife was pregnant. *I don't believe it, are you sure?*

And Mary was with child but not yet married; she was probably still a teenager and was in a difficult social situation so she had travelled over 90 miles to the hill country outside Jerusalem, a tough journey in the height of the summer heat that would have probably taken her at least four days. Her circumstances were not easy or happy.

And yet, these two chat away about the glory of God's will. It's going to be ok. This is his plan. Don't worry.

In this passage, Elizabeth invites us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing through unexpected people or the relatives that we meet? Where is God at work in the circumstances of our Christmas, good or bad?

So, I hope you are ready for Christmas. I hope you can see that God is with you as you decorate the tree or make mince pies in a steamy kitchen while you listen to the carol concert from King's College.

And may we all, like Elizabeth and Mary, give thanks that God had a plan save and free us by sending his son to this world. And may we, like Elizabeth and Mary, be part of a community that supports each other as we hope and wait for that birth renewed every year.

