

Dear Friends,

Just when you thought things could not get any worse: clothes manufacturers have begun announcing that they will no longer make glittery Christmas jumpers because of the environmental effects. This seemingly trivial loss of tinsel will affect some people more than others. For some people the glitter, the glam and the silly jumpers and hats sum up a lot of what Christmas means to them. I say this tongue in cheek, but there is a more serious aspect.

Certainly, for younger people this loss will be keenly felt as the spectre of more social restriction looms ever larger. For example, young professionals who have moved to a new community to further the career and have no local friends. For them working from home and cancelled work parties represent real challenges to their wellbeing and the erosion of festive fun has an effect on mental health for young and old alike.

Coincidentally, is it me, or was there a time when public Christmas decorations had a more nativity-based theme? No longer do I see civic manger scenes built by local apprentices or decorations depicting the manger. Even angels are becoming an endangered species, although stars continue to grace some High Streets. Happily, we did manage to buy an advent calendar this year that progressively retells the nativity story for children (thank you M & S). Our three-year-old grandson regards this as an important part of his daily routine and insists on being read the next instalment (as well as looking forward to the chocolate). There does seem to be a creeping secularisation of one of our holiest festivals. Another area that deserves much more recognition is the positive effect of faith commitment on mental health. The spiritual aspect of Christmas meets a deep human need for awe and wonder, meaning and mystery.

I reflect each year on the distinction made by C. S. Lewis between Christmas and Xmas. I suppose carol & Christingle services, midnight mass and Bible-themed advent calendars are to do with Christmas. Glittery jumpers and elf hats are to do with the secular celebration of Xmas.

During the difficult period of the pandemic and increasing environmental concerns, we rightly reflect on the question 'What is Christmas for?' This is an important question made more difficult by the accretions that began by pointing to the inner meaning of Christmas and have become an end in themselves. Strikingly, Judaism was actually strengthened by exile and the

destruction of its beloved temple. This led to the development of synagogues and the emphasis on the family as the heart of Jewish practice. I wonder whether the spiritual meaning of Christmas may in some way that is not yet clear to us, become strengthened as some of the clutter of sparkly jumpers, funny hats and office parties are stripped away. We will miss them, but will their absence give more space for the Christ child?

I have already broken a personal tradition this year. I have failed to read in public the lovely Advent poem by John Betjeman, "Advent 1955". In it he reflects on the inner purpose of Christmas, and below are some excerpts. In whatever way you celebrate the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ, I pray that the joy of which angels spoke, and the glory and peace of which they sang make infuse your days and that the awe and mystery of the incarnation may touch your spirit and give you hope.

God bless you,

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham.

Superintendent Minister

The Advent wind begins to stir  
With sea-like sounds in our Scotch fir,  
It's dark at breakfast, dark at tea,  
And in between we only see  
Clouds hurrying across the sky  
And rain-wet roads the wind blows dry

For now we feel the world spin round  
On some momentous journey bound -  
Journey to what? to whom? to where?  
The Advent bells call out 'Prepare,  
Your world is journeying to the birth  
Of God made Man for us on earth.' ...

And branches bending to the gale  
Against great skies all silver pale  
The world seems travelling into space,  
And travelling at a faster pace  
Than in the leisured summer weather  
When we and it sit out together,

'The time draws near the birth of Christ'.  
A present that cannot be priced  
Given two thousand years ago  
Yet if God had not given so  
He still would be a distant stranger  
And not the Baby in the manger.