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Christmas in your heart

Christmas isn't Christmas 'til happens in your heart:

somewhere deep inside you is where Christmas really starts.

So give your heart to Jesus: you'll discover when you do that it's

Christmas, really Christmas for you.

Back in the last century, my church used to put on a Christmas production at our local theatre. We'd book it for the Sunday before Christmas and, surrounded by the scenery of whatever panto was in production that year, we'd tell the story of Christmas through readings, songs and a glorified nativity play featuring children and young people from the Sunday School and youth groups.

It was the highlight of my year.

Being part of those productions – I did six in the end, and very narrowly missed out on being Mary, one of the great regrets of my life – was one of the formative experiences of my early life. They developed in me a love of the creative arts and of performing, but they also offered me a perspective on Christmas that continues to shape me even now.

That opening stanza is from a song we sang most years. It's ludicrously twee and yet I know that it played a huge role in helping me to understand – even as a very small child – that choosing to respond to Jesus' invitation to live in a transformational relationship with him changes how we understand Christmas.

This year, that understanding of both the huge, overarching narrative of Christmas, that God chose to come and live alongside us in the joy and pain of human existence, and the personal, intimate truth that he loves and wants a relationship with *you* has never been more important.

Since we sent last week's Together Apart email, the Christmas goalposts have moved in a significant way; almost all of us will have had our plans disrupted and many will be experiencing yet more grief over our separation from loved ones. For those in church leadership positions, the personal impact of tightening restrictions is compounded by the ongoing need to make difficult and painful decisions about how to best balance the deep desire of many to be together in a church building at Christmas with keeping everybody physically safe.

We know how hard this is and we stand with you.

We pray that, against the odds and acknowledging the pain that has run as a seam through this year, somewhere deep inside we'll each know the presence of Jesus, God with us, in a new and transformational way this Christmas.

With love and gratitude for each and every one of you.

Louise, on behalf of the wider Arthur Rank Centre team

Good news for all

Bible reading: Luke 1:39-45

Mary Visits Elizabeth

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!'

Reflection

Here we have a glimpse of part of the story of Mary. It is placed in this section of Luke's gospel to help us prepare for the birth of Jesus Christ. The role of Mary is not huge in the pages of the gospels, but her importance is crucial and unique. The story today catches something both of the shock and the acceptance of the young woman taken over by God. For me, the most important part of the story of Mary is that it expresses the counter-cultural nature of the Christian gospel. We probably lose sight too often of the revolutionary tone of Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, which follows immediately after today's reading:

He has scattered the proud in their conceit

Casting down the mighty from their thrones

He has filled the hungry with good things

And sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)

And hidden with that song are these words:

He has looked with favour on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call be blessed. (Luke 1:48)

Mary's story is counter-cultural because it is about God's favour to the lowly, his exaltation of those without glory, without voice, without power: Mary is a peasant girl destined to marry a village carpenter.

When I became a Christian in my mid-teens, this part of the gospel really spoke to me – a gospel of Liberation. For this baby who Mary was carrying and gave birth to, whose birth we celebrate in a few days' time, came to bring good news for poor and hungry people who are to be filled with good things;

good news for imprisoned and oppressed people who are to be set free; good news for blind people who are to receive their sight; good news for us all, who are to discover that even so we are loved and that in the here and now, in this present moment, we can know what it is to live in the Lord's favour.

Prayer

Gracious God, I thank you for my personal faith. You have spoken to my needs and you live in my heart as my personal Saviour and Lord. Thank you.

Help me also to recognise that I need to look beyond myself into your world, at its need, injustice, hurt and pain. Help me then, Lord, to move into action for the sake of your Kingdom. Amen.

Response

Take some time to reflect on the story of Mary. What is the 'good news' you hear in this story? How will you allow that good news to speak to you this Christmas?

Revd Richard J Teal, President of the Methodist Conference