

Dear Friends,

Necessity has been called the mother of invention. Despite all the constraints the church is currently facing, I am impressed with the creativity and innovation that has emerged. If we take the concept of “blended church” for example, how many of us even a year ago would have considered the possibility of an interactive service with real time participants scattered in several locations, including a church, as well as peoples’ homes? And the luxury of having meetings with participants spread across the circuit without the need for driving on busy roads is actually quite a boon. Nevertheless, I am sure we all miss the social aspect of gathered meetings.

As I write, news is breaking of the first Covid-19 vaccinations, beginning to be given to vulnerable NHS patients. This gives hope for a return to some kind of normality and also prompts us to remember those for whom life has moved on during the period since last March, through a difficult diagnosis, or bereavement, or perhaps a financial or educational setback. It would be a good outcome if we emerge from this pandemic with a heightened empathy for others – the ability to see life through another person’s ‘window’, from their perspective, and so gain an insight into their perceptions and experience.

Pam Rhodes tells an insightful story in the innovative carol service from Methodist Central Hall Westminster. This was produced in partnership with Premier Radio and streamed via YouTube. A few years ago, Pam and her husband were on a visit to the Holy Land. They noticed that one unaccompanied traveller on the coach was invariably late returning to the coach, to the annoyance of some members of the party who were keen to visit as many interesting sites as possible. Pam and her husband started to accompany the lady at the various places of interest and were intrigued to learn the reason why the older lady was walking so slowly. Her footwear, a kind of oversized slip-on sandal, was too big for her and made walking slow and difficult. As they got to know the lady, they discovered that she had booked to go on the trip, with her son, a full year in advance. In the interim her son had received a serious diagnosis, and by the time of the planned pilgrimage he was not well enough to accompany his mother. She was wearing his shoes because she was determined that (symbolically at least) he would get

to walk in the footsteps of Jesus before succumbing to his illness. On learning the lady's story, Pam and her husband experienced greater empathy and were able to be more patient when the coach was slightly delayed.

The story of Jesus' birth and infancy does evoke empathy within His followers. A young woman becomes pregnant at a time when there is great upheaval in the land. She and her fiancé must travel to their ancestral home where she is reduced to giving birth in very unsuitable conditions. Quite soon the little family must flee for the safety of their child to a neighbouring country until the danger passes. At a human level, the story is still poignant even after 2000 years. There are many resonances with current news and much human interest in the Gospel accounts of the first Christmas. This year many people will be celebrating Christmas in a different, possibly quieter, or less busy way. Maybe that will give us more opportunity to quietly reflect on the central story of Christmas. God became clothed in flesh inspired by love for mankind. As we reflect on that story, we can be changed by its influence so that our empathy for others can grow.

C. S. Lewis once wrote an essay distinguishing between the secular festival of *Xmas* and the Christian festival of *Christmas*. No doubt we will continue to enjoy some of the traditions of the secular '*Xmas*', but we may want this Christmas to carefully re-read the accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and absorb their accounts of Jesus' birth. Let us also help our children and grandchildren to 'rejoice in the gift of Jesus to us as the Light of the World' and 'hear and receive the message of the coming of Christ'.

The world changed after the coming of Jesus. A new ethic of compassion began to influence society and challenge many practices in the Roman Empire. The coming of Christ still challenges society to think again and to act with greater compassion and understanding of others. Christmas also challenges the Church and its members to be aware of God with us and to offer His love to all.

God bless you,

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent minister.