

Christmas – Emmanuel, God with us

This year, I keep hearing, 'Christmas will be different.' Undoubtedly those voices are right. Many across our nation will be painfully aware of loved faces that have fallen victim to our global pandemic, or who are unable to be with us because of vulnerability in various ways. Many will be working out who among family and friends they will be able to see, and who they won't. And of course many will be struggling with poverty, caused by loss of jobs or security. But whenever I hear that 'Christmas will be different this year,' I find myself reflecting that every year there are those for whom Christmas is 'different.'

This year, like every year, I like to find time during Advent to reflect on what, for me, makes Christmas 'Christmas.' And I like to reflect on things that have made Christmas special for me in the past. There are many things, but this year I again found myself remembering my time as a Street Pastor. Before moving back to Derbyshire, I was a member of Leicester City Centre Street Pastors for years. And one of my greatest blessings each Christmas was undoubtedly time spent with the homeless of Leicester. Each year they would teach me about the true spirit of Christmas. I remember numerous occasions sitting with homeless people while they spoke of the pain of being cold and hungry, and the far greater pain of being completely ignored by busy shoppers rushing about buying things they did not need. And of course, I remembered at these times that Jesus was born particularly to show God's love for the poor and neglected.

I have so many special memories of the amazing people we met, and of incredible examples of generosity. I remember one year, a few days before Christmas, on a night when the temperature had fallen to about -12°C, we gave a sleeping bag to a shivering girl in a shop doorway. Her face lit up with pure joy. 'You're so wonderful,' she said, 'Now I can give my blanket to X who doesn't have one.' My prayer for us all this Christmas is that we can all be touched, and shamed, and inspired, by her spirit of generosity, and can look with fresh eyes into that stable long ago, and see anew what really matters this Christmas.

Yours in Christ,

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