

December 2017



Dear Friends,

The story of Advent and the Incarnation – the coming of Jesus- is one we look forward to hearing every year. I have very happy memories of looking forward to Christmas as a family, and as a Christian I loved hearing about the Christian story and singing the familiar carols. But whilst our familiarity with the story is a good thing in many ways, there is a danger that we do not hear the shocking nature of the story as it appeared to those who heard it at the time, because we **'know the ending before we start.'** We can sometimes think that it is necessary to present the story of Christmas and Jesus to 'others' (i.e. non-churchgoers) as if getting them to come to church and become like us is the object of the exercise, whereas what God wants is the radical transformation of the world and human society. He wants us to be at the vanguard of this and set the example to a watching world. **"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."** (Matthew 5:16)

How is it that we can see how Christian truths apply to others and not ourselves? It is nothing new. In Luke 6:42 Jesus said **"How can you say to your neighbour, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye."** And in the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14) , Jesus condemned the Pharisee who congratulated himself, and denigrated others.

A recent sermon I heard recently struck me very powerfully, when the speaker said we should not so much live **"for Jesus"** but **"with Jesus"**. We can live **"for Jesus"** when we try to put the Christian faith into practice by acts of good works in our families and our neighbours and of works of service within the church, and it is very important that we try to do this. The danger with this approach is that we can start to see our own contribution as all-important and that therefore, in some way, the coming of the Kingdom of God depends on things that **we are involved in** being done in **our way** and in **our time**. If other Christians are involved in our projects, it can lead to us seeing them as pawns in our game, and when they do not quite do things in our way, we can feel justified in criticising them and feeling superior to them, just like the Pharisee in the parable. The Pharisees of Jesus' time were happy when John the Baptist was calling for Gentiles and non-Pharisees to repent and be baptised- they were shocked when John called them to repentance and baptism too.

The Christmas story is one of the Messiah coming to His own people in an unexpected way and time. His people had returned from exile in Babylon in the 6th century, but the promised restoration of Israel to the previous heights had not happened and they still felt, to some extent in exile. Jesus did not come in a way the religious people expected, and his ministry was mainly to those on the margins of the establishment religion. He called for all to be **'born again'** (John 3:3) and to be renewed by taking Jesus' words to their hearts (Matt 7:21-28) and to **'abide in Him.'** (John 15:1-8) He therefore does not want us to just do things **'for**

Contd....

Him', like Martha (**Luke 10:38-42**), using our talents to serve others in our own way, but to be more like Mary and spend time listening to Him, in reading His word, in fellowship, in prayer and in the sacraments. Like Paul, we should consider ourselves **"crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."** (**Gal 2:19-20**), and therefore we live our lives **"with Jesus"**, with us checking whether what we are doing is actually His will and His way, we have a heart of service to others as unworthy servants (John 13:1-7) and that we **"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, (Phil 2; 3-5)**

What is the difference between doing things **"With Jesus"** as opposed to **"For Jesus"**? In my view it is a matter of humility and a desire to be like Jesus

"Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Phil 2:6-8)

and to desire that Jesus **"reigns in me."** If we move to working **"for Jesus"** to **"with Jesus"** it will, in my view, transform our whole Christian lives and experiences, and enable God to do His work in His time- in and through us, without our sinful humanity **'getting in the way'!**

This advent hymn can help us as we meditate on Christ's coming among us this Advent and Christmas.

**"Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becomes poor.**

**Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee.
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,
Make us what thou wouldst have us be.
Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee."**

In Christian love

Paul