

God is at work!

I do hope we are all in a participatory mood this morning, for you all need to sway and enjoy this great song!!!

Cliff Richard mistletoe and wine.

You can't beat a good Cliff song at Christmas, logs on the fire and gifts on the Tree, rejoice in the good that we see.

I wonder for many people has Christmas just become all about eating and drinking too much, Santa, Snow, and Songs, will the current Xfactor prodigy be number one or will Cliff release another catchy Christmas song and there's the Christmas presents of course.

How many of us still have one of last years' Christmas present in the box at the back of the cupboard? The foot spa, the smoothie maker and the fondue set or perhaps at best we have only used it once or twice over the year, that special gift you thought you needed but have hardly ever used.

For me Christmas seems to go past in a blur of food, wine, carol services, rushing around visiting people, cooking, wishing for a different Christmas present, or perhaps wishing you had brought a present, or Just simply trying to make the present you have work.

Then almost as soon as the Christmas meal is over, the focus is on New Year's Eve, I heard on the radio the other day on that someone was delivering their first batch of Easter Eggs.

The reality of Christmas is far from the idyllic celebrations the world would have us believe exists, with gifts on the Tree and logs on the fire and for some Christmas will always hold some sad memories.

But we console ourselves, next Christmas will be different. Next year will be the best Christmas yet.

For me as each year passes it feels like Christ is being squeezed out of Christmas altogether, with the latest Census figures showing some 14 million people in this country saying they have no religion at all. With the Nativity

plays being stopped or censored and people sending Christmas greetings as happy Xmas, where is Christmas heading?

I guess in some ways we are like the Jewish people in Esther's story we have been looking at over these last few weeks, trying to live out their faith in difficult circumstances. But just as God had a rescue plan for his people so does God for us today, which all began that first Christmas.

I would like to reflect upon that first Christmas and see what we can learn from it in trying to recapture something of the real meaning of Christmas.

Now before we start and you may be thinking I am being a bit of a bar humbug as your Christmases are fine. I am not and I am not saying God isn't in the present giving and all the preparations that go with Christmas, you only have to look at how excited children get with Christmas. Our Foster daughter was beside herself with excitement seeing the tree go up this year and God is in all that joy.

We do great things here at Christmas like having the Christmas meal and the Carol service and I think people generally are more forgiving at this time of year as well.

Christmas is a great time of year.

Jesus himself spent much of his time at meals, parties and weddings with his first miracle turning water into wine. Jesus knew how to enjoy himself.

God knows how to give good gifts and Jesus says of his father in Mathew 7 v 11

"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! " God is a God who loves to give.

And we know from the Christmas story that the wise men brought Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh as presents for the Messiah.

God is a God of fun and laughter as well as a God of integrity, as much as Jesus enjoyed good knees up as fully man, we have to also hold in mind that Jesus was fully God and did not compromise himself at these meals and parties but stayed true to his values as fully God.

So in the midst of the joy and the fun of Christmas let's look back and see what we can learn.

Luke 2 8-20

The first thing that struck me was that God shook ordinary people just like you and me out of their complacency in a dramatic way. Year after year those shepherds could have been on that hillside with a vague knowledge that the Messiah would come one day.

Suddenly God breaks into the shepherds lives and blows them away with a full on celestial Choir. The choir we have here is great, but with a whole sky full of the heavenly hosts and the angel it must have been a sight to behold.

If some the angels turned up today how would we react, would we be as terrified like the Shepherds? I wonder what would it take to shake us from our complacency today? To realise God is real and active in all our lives.

I wonder do we still hold God in awe as the shepherds did?

I wonder do people still have the desire to come and see and seek the Jesus as the shepherds did?

I still think people do, I was at a Carol service up in London and overheard two people commenting on how good the service had been and they started to question amongst themselves why they did not come to church more often.

I still think the Christmas story still causes people to think about God and ponder life. I was at a Nativity play the other day and I wondered how many people reflected on the songs and the story acted out by the children?

So the shepherds rushed off to see the Christ, the Messiah the anointed one who had been born.

A defining moment in history when God give the greatest gift the world has ever known and will ever know, that of his son.

For the act of Jesus birth was no ordinary event that first Christmas
It was

An act of New Creation – God became human

An act of new beginning – from BC before Christ to AD Anno Domini

An act of grace – in that Christ was not the product of the human race but was God Sent.

It was a unique act for a unique person, conceived of the Holy Spirit.

I wonder how many of us hear would like a new beginning, new hope in the difficult situations we face in life?

The reality is however that there is no magic wand that will make our lives better overnight or in an instant.

But what we can be assured because of from that first Christmas God is with us, walking beside us guiding us and leading us in the good times and in the hard times he has promised never to leave us or forsake us. But sometimes that means God working through you and me to help each other out in showing Gods love.

The shepherds still had to go back to their day jobs after the excitement of Jesus birth they may not have seen another angel in the rest of their lives but they were changed forever.

Mary and Joseph definition of Emanuel God with them may be different from ours it literally meant in the feeding and changing Jesus nappy. They would have the worry of fleeing for their lives to Egypt and living as refugees, they will face the anguish of losing their Son on a trip to Jerusalem and the pain of seeing your son crucified to the joy of his resurrection. So that God will be our Emanuel our Abba father. Christmas is not just about a Fluffy Santa clause who comes out once a year, but a God who is with us 24/7 365 days a year not a distant God but by the Holy Spirit a God who does life with us day in day out.

But back in the day job, the shepherds could not keep quiet about the events of that night they spread the word concerning what they had been told about the Child, and people were amazed with what they heard. May be we need to be like those shepherds and spread the word this Christmas.

Back to the passage then I wonder how long Mary and Joseph stayed in the stable? Did the Inn keeper take pity on the new family with a baby to feed and look after? One can only speculate but we do know with all that had gone on

those first few days it says “ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart”

I wonder how good are we at pondering things? Do we treasure all that life brings us?

I was reading a management blog the other month and it was giving advice on how to manage your time and live a better and more balanced life. Do you know what it suggested you do?

It suggested you spend 10 minutes at the start of each day giving thanks and appreciating what you have. It did not suggest who you should give thanks too and if you don't have a faith who do you thank? But in order for you to do that we need to spend some time pondering and treasuring just like Mary did.

The challenge this Christmas could be to spend some time pondering life, perhaps giving thanks to God for all that he has provided for you rejoicing in the good that we see or may its asking god to be your strength just to get through another day.

I was having my hair cut the other day and I was chatting to the barber as us men do, whilst having my hair cut and we got onto the subject of Christmas and the Barber recounted his best Christmas memory. He had just started work and unfortunately his parent had just recently divorced and so his mum could not afford to buy his younger brother a bike. He had just started work and decided that he could afford to pay for half the cost of the bike and his mum paid the other half, and he said he would never forget the look on his brother's face that Christmas morning when his brother received this unexpected gift.

I am guessing many who visited Mary and Joseph would have had that same look on their faces.

So when I was pondering my thoughts about Christmas I thought it might be good to create a Christmas Journal that all the family could write down their favourite memory of Christmas in each year. Then each Christmas bring out the journal out and reread what people have written over the years.

God's word is just like a journal in some respects, written about ordinary people just like you and me as a reminder of all that God has done and will do in our

lives, a reminder of hope, a reminder of acceptance a reminder of the real meaning of Christmas.

My youngest son must have been pondering Christmas and said Dad it would be really boring if every day was Christmas. I could see where he was coming from we would all soon grow tired of drinking too much, over eating and opening up endless stuff we don't really need.

However if we see the true meaning of Christmas as God being with us every day Emanuel, sharing our lives with us, then we have the opportunity to open the gift of life each and every day.

Jesus said he came so that we can live life to the full. It's just down to us whether we want to open the gift or leave it under tree. It's up to us once the gift is open to use it, enjoy it, appreciate it and may be even changed by it or will we leave it on a shelf to gather dust for another year?

God's gift of love and forgiveness is always open to us we don't have to be good boys and girls to receive it

It's just up to us to treasure it, accept it, ponder it and respond to it.