

Sunday 12 and Wednesday 15 December 2021

Annual Carol Service

Baubles on the altar at St Barnabas



Every year we deck the Halls with wreaths of holly. In fact, the Halls are an extremely nice family and our brutal treatment of them is more than a little mean.

Words. We need to be careful of our words because otherwise they slip off the tongue yet they don't actually say what we want them to say.

I wonder if you like crossword puzzles? If you do, I wonder if you can identify the following Christmas Carols from the clues?

The first clue Can you name this carol from the clue, 'Nocturnal noiselessness' The carol? It's 'Silent night'.

A second one? 'Arrival time 2400 hrs - weather: cloudless' ... 'It came upon a midnight clear!'

The clues in a crossword are designed in such a way that they say something and yet they don't say quite say it: it's almost like talking in code. Here's one more: 'Delight for this planet' ... Got the idea? it's 'Joy to the world'.

The reason I'm asking these questions is because any outsider looking into our Christmas activities would probably think that we're doing all of it in the form of code with cryptic crossword clues. We speak about Christmas but seem never to actually say what this 'Christmas' is all about. We give presents but forget to explain the occasion that is so special that we mark it by giving gifts. We give cards to commemorate the event but write simply 'Seasons' Greetings' inside. The words and the message don't quite agree.

So let's start the process of taking these clues apart in order to discover the meaning within—the real meaning of Christmas. To make that process simpler, I'm going to concentrate on the name itself, looking at the word 'Christmas'.

The second half of the word is the easy bit, because '**mass**' is a word from an old almost-forgotten language that means simply a celebration, usually religious. So Christmas is about religion, about God. At Christmas we celebrate a wonderful God-filled event. It also says something about a God who wants us to enjoy ourselves if we are to celebrate in his name with a party and singing. So, as we think about singing, here's another one, an easy one, 'The dozen festive 24-hour periods' Any idea? It's 'The twelve days of Christmas'.

But at Christmas, what *is* the God-filled event that we're celebrating? The clue comes in the name itself, so what's this new cryptic clue, the code, that will help us explain Christmas?

At Christmas we're celebrating the **Christ**-mass so the God-related clue is in the word 'Christ'. At Christmas we celebrate the way that God entered into human history. God came into a baby named Jesus. Indeed, 'history' ever since has been 'his story'. On that first Christmas Day in far off Bethlehem, God took on human form. Here's another carol: 'The event was synchronised for those attending wool-covered mammals during the hours of darkness'? ... 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night.'

Let's take that mind-blowing sentence about God and untie it, gently looking inside it, look at it in just same way as we receive a Christmas present from someone we love. If you dunk a biscuit into your mug of tea, the biscuit becomes so full of tea that the biscuit and the tea in the biscuit occupy the same volume of space: where does the biscuit end and the tea start; where does the biscuit start and the tea end? Obviously, they are the same. And in the same way, on that first Christmas Day, God entered a human body: he came into a small human-baby sized volume of space that we worship today as Jesus. It had never happened like that

before. In the language that everyone spoke when Jesus was born, the word for something being absorbed into something else is *Christos*. When we give Jesus the title of 'Christ' we're saying that he (Jesus) absorbed God to the extent that he is brimming full of God; indeed, it's better to say that he *is* God. He's Jesus the God-filled, Jesus *the* Christ.

The consequences are enormous: no longer do we need to ask what God is like because we can look at Jesus. Because Jesus is God-filled, we can learn about God and speak with God. Because of Jesus being God, he could forgive sins and speak the very words that God would have us hear. ***That's*** why we celebrate, and that's why we call this commemoration Christ-mass.

So, this Christmas, this Christ-mass, let's make sure we're not talking in words that no-one understands. We're not singing 'Righteous Darkness' but 'O holy night'. We're not singing 'Frozen precipitation commence' but 'Let it snow'. We're not singing 'Far off in an animal feeder' but 'Away in a manger'. We need to use the words properly. We're not singing, 'We're a trinity of monarchs' but 'We three kings', we're not talking about, 'Hitting Mr and Mrs Hall' but 'Deck the Halls ...'

And we're not celebrating for the sake of a celebrating. We're celebrating Christmas. We're celebrating because a baby by the name of Jesus was born and became the Christ, the God-filled.

Finally, may all of us at the Church wish you love the God-filled joy of Christ-mass and a wonderful New Year.