

**December 2023**

# Carol service



**Sermon © Revd Dr Paul Monk**

It's time for some truly terrible jokes. Why is Santa scared of chimneys? Because he's claus-trophobic. And why was Santa's little helper so sad? He had low elf-esteem.

The story of Santa is the very stuff of every modern Christmas. For example, he gives toys to everyone who behaves properly during the year. He's always cheerful. He's the kind of figure from which we make a much-loved uncle or a favourite grandparent. While we're at it, what do you call Santa's little helpers? They are subordinate Clauses.

So let's explore Santa further. The name 'Santa' comes from the language used by the Romans who ruled Palestine at the time of Jesus two thousand years ago. The word literally means 'holy' and is usually attached to something else, so we talk about Holy Scripture or Holy Communion; sometimes we talk about Holy Church—Holiness even. By the way, what you get when you cross Santa with a duck? A Christmas quacker.

'Holiness' is a slippery concept but here goes: a holy person is different in a good way; a holy person is godly and in set apart for God, by which I mean parts of their lives are given over to God such as morality, and times of the day become God's,

most obviously for prayer and good work. So in describing this figure as *Santa Claus* we're saying that something about him is holy and thinking honestly about him could bring us closer to God because he and his actions say something about God. What's big and jolly and says, 'Oh, oh, oh'? Santa Claus when walking backwards.

For many people, Santa has taken the place of God, so it's probably time to look for similarities between God and Santa. To be sure, he *is* like God in some ways: we know about him although we've never actually seen him. We can't see Santa and we can't see God, because God is a spirit and we are physical. Like God he knows everything about us and responds to what he knows. But there are big differences as well. To many people in Britain today, Santa rewards good children but ignores the bad, but God—*the real God*—not only rewards everyone's good behaviour but also deals with badness once and for all and He can do so because he is good. Incidentally, for many people, Santa and God are for children and not adults, which is surely the biggest joke of Christmas. By the way, talking of jokes, what do you call a kid who doesn't believe in Santa? A rebel without a Claus.

As I said, Santa rewards good behaviour. So does God, but God's rewards are not plastic toys or calories but life after death that is eternal and the embodiment of unconditional love. Just as we think of Santa when we see gifts ... and see gifts and think of Santa, so we see God when we experience gifts ... but think this time of gifts such as sacrificial love, meaning in our lives, and purpose. And we are invited to see God when we see the greatest gift of them all, Jesus; just as Jesus was for all, forgiving, and inclusive, so is God. Incidentally, what do you call Santa when he's wearing ear-muffs? Anything because he can't hear you.

To conclude: I hope and pray that your Christmas is good and holy; I pray that every time you see Santa you think of God and His goodness; I pray that, like anything honestly described as 'Santa', you grow to become holy. I pray that you have become part of God's great plan, and his love and joy and peace have rubbed off on you to the extent that you are becoming Christlike—now that is the perfect gift for Christmas.