

You don't need me to tell you that this is very different Christmas. This church is usually filled at our Midnight and Christmas morning services with families and their visitors, many unknown to us but nevertheless welcome. And even fuller for our Carol service and Crib service – both cancelled this year. Most of us will sit down to Christmas dinner with a much smaller gathering than we anticipated and maybe a timetable of Zoom calls to make at least some human contact with those we are parted from. It has been the same, to a greater or lesser extent, since the end of March, but we feel it acutely at this time. In the opinion of some, Christmas has been cancelled.

Yet here we are, once more celebrating the mystery of the incarnation, the Word made Flesh. And we are joined by those watching on You Tube, thanks to a small elegant white disc high up on the north west wall of the church, connected to an aerial in the tower, sending signals to another aerial on the Vicarage wall; and the wonder of the internet. Thank you Plusnet.

Aware that we would be unable to welcome our usual influx of visitors into church this Christmas we have tried to take the story out into our community. In collaboration with Bovingdon Baptist Church and our Primary Academy we have produced a digital Christingle service, available on our You Tube channel, and distributed 650 Christingle kits to all the

children at BPA and a number of members of both churches. Thank you Waitrose in Chesham for the oranges.

We've also initiated a 'Walkabout' Advent calendar, with images depicting the Christmas story displayed in windows of homes around Bovingdon. This afternoon, a number of children and their families brought their completed calendar sheets to church to collect a small prize and to wonder at our Nativity silhouette in the south porch – please do take a look when you leave tonight - and our 15ft Christmas tree.

Thank you to Marchants Farm, and to Bovingdon Christmas Trees for our magnificent indoor tree too.

Our children also populated our Crib, at a much smaller scale Crib service last Sunday. And there you can see, as you can see also in the windows of homes around Bovingdon, the characters who make up the story: The ox and the ass, the shepherds with their sheep, the wise men, Mary, Joseph - and of course the baby in the manger.

There are no shepherds, donkeys or wise men in John's gospel, nor even a manger and a baby. He starts his 'good news' with a proposition about the nature of God and his involvement in the world, aimed at first century philosophers as well as Jews in Palestine. He seizes on the Stoic idea that the Word - Logos in Greek - is the stuff that makes the world cohere and establishes patterns in nature and intellect. But he turns the Stoic concept on its head by declaring that this Word - this stuff - became Flesh and dwelt among us. God became human, one of us.

The message of Christmas is that God won't be confined to heaven. He has broken our rules, disturbed our careful, logical, scientific understanding of the way the world works. Why? Because he loves us, he loves the world he has created, and equally he hates to see injustice and evil and pain and suffering. And so he enters our world as one of us, born not in a palace but in a stable, to a young Jewish girl in a forgotten corner of the Roman empire. The all-powerful God, creator of heaven and earth, born to a virgin and laid in a cow's feeding trough. It doesn't compute. It's crazy. And that is the wonder and the splendour and the glory of the mystery which we celebrate tonight.

There is a darker side to the story, which is already more than hinted at in our gospel reading. 'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.' Of course, that's a reference to Jesus' rejection by his own people. But it's also a reference to 2,000 years of rejection ever since – by those who explicitly choose a path of selfishness and evil – but also by the Church and by us as Christians who have so imperfectly lived out his teaching.

For all our material progress the world is full of anger and unhappiness, of war and oppression, of hunger and poverty. And now we are plunged into a pandemic which has brought an extra burden of suffering, a burden borne disproportionately by the poor and marginalised.

The Christmas message of love and peace and joy has never been more relevant or so badly needed. And this is no superficial joy, manufactured to make us all smile and pretend that the world is smiling back. It is a joy forged through suffering and death, as we will be reminded when we celebrate Communion together tonight. Jesus' body was broken and his blood poured out for us, so that through his death we might find new life and a renewed relationship with God.

The birth of a baby in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago was to start a revolution which turned the world upside down and whose effects are still widespread today. But more than that, it was the definitive announcement of God's love for his world, and of his promise that love triumphs over death, light over darkness. Thank you God.

'Our hope is in the name of the Lord, who has made heaven and earth', writes the Psalmist. And to that we can add our Christian hope in the Word made flesh, who 'made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.' Thank you Jesus.