

## GOD IS FOR LIFE, NOT JUST FOR CHRISTMAS

→ Several weeks ago now I was preaching at another church near here and I was asked to preach about the birth of Jesus. A strange request you might feel for sometime in October, but the church in question was following a particular series of reading material and had arrived at the Christmas story in the autumn. In fact, we did something similar here a few years ago and some people thought it strange then I remember!

.....But why is that I wonder? Why is it so strange to be thinking about the Christmas story at a time of year other than Christmas? The advertisers and the shops are keen to be getting us thinking about Christmas as soon as the summer holidays are over it seems, so why shouldn't we start thinking about it early in the church? Sadly though, as soon as the twelve days of Christmas actually start, the advertisers and the stores are then encouraging us to forget about it as quickly as possible. The decorations come down, the sales begin and almost immediately the displays for Valentines Day are set up. When the twelve days of Christmas actually begin, we're encouraged to move on really quickly, to put it behind us for another year and perhaps some of us are so weary of all the hype and fuss by then that we're actually glad to move on and think about something else. But why should we want to get it over with and move one when what we're actually celebrating is the most wonderful news ever?!

.....Well, I wonder how many of you can actually remember what you received for Christmas last year? Anyone want to tell me what they got? ..... Great, thanks so much for sharing those memories! The fact that you can remember what you got is a good sign – it probably means that the gift you received was something that you really wanted, it was something useful or fun and it is something that has made a difference to your life. Those of us who can't remember, well maybe what we received wasn't what we wanted! Perhaps we haven't even opened it, or we've already taken it to the charity shop, or it hasn't had a real impact on our lives! It's been quickly cast aside like the wrapping paper and the bones from the turkey!

.....I guess many of you will have seen those stickers that some people have in the back of their cars which say "A dog is for life, not just for Christmas." Of course, that's an appeal for people to really think about whether the pet they are considering giving as a gift can really be looked after in the long term. That may not be quite such a crucial question for lots of the other gifts that we receive, but we've already proved that lots of us can't even remember what we received last year, so how much notice do we really take of the gifts we receive!

→ The Christmas story is about the most wonderful gift that any of us could ever receive and the truth is that Christmas is for life and not just for Christmas. So, in that sense it doesn't matter whether we think about it in February, or July, or October. Of course, I'm not suggesting that we should be eating turkey dinners or putting up our tree at any time during the year! But, the birth of Jesus Christ, which is what we celebrate at Christmas, has meaning all year round, because Christ is for life, not just for Christmas.

.....As the angels sang, the birth of Jesus really is “good news of great joy!” The fact that God came down to earth in the Lord Jesus Christ changed everything forever. That’s why Jesus is also known as Immanuel, because he is “God with us!” It shows us that rather than being a distant creator who now has little or nothing to do with ordinary people like us and cares nothing for all the ups and downs of our lives, our God is right here with us through everything.

.....He’s here to forgive us when we mess up; he’s here to comfort us when life is painful; he’s here to give us strength when life is tough; he’s here to rejoice with us when life is great; he’s here to show us how to live life in the way that he always intended us to live it. He’s here because he wants to share life with us.

.....But just like every other gift that we may receive this Christmas, the gift of Christ which God gave to the world, needs to be received by us and taken into our lives, otherwise this time next year, you’ll have forgotten all about him, just like many of the gifts that you received last year. Christ is the most valuable, life changing gift that any of us will ever receive. He is for life and not just for Christmas, so you don’t even have to wait for Christmas to come, to allow his presence in the world and in your life to make a difference. If you’ve never taken this special Christmas gift seriously, you can start to experience this gift today, on the first Sunday in Advent if you want.

.....And for those of you who have already realised that Christ is for life and not just for Christmas, then I encourage you to share that gift of love and grace and forgiveness that you experience every day of your life with others, so that this Christmas and maybe even in February, and July and next October, we may all have the joy of knowing that Christ is for life, and not just for Christmas.