

St Brandon's Carol Service 2022:

'A Christmas we can believe in'?

Early November, the last few pumpkins still in evidence, news of soaring inflation and fuel prices on every front page... I popped into our local discount supermarket for some bananas, as you do, and there it was.

A bright red and green brochure, proclaiming
'A Christmas you can Believe in'.

Well I know seasonal shopping starts early, but I wasn't ready for this.

I tried to avoid the pile at the checkout, but failed.

When I got home, there it was, the garish brochure with its haunting slogan

'A Christmas you can believe in.'

And here I am, more than 6 weeks later. still thinking about it.

I wonder what makes **'A Christmas we can believe in'?**

According to the brochure, everything needed can be found instore, from 'the best of British banquets'

to a wide range of Christmas spirit – with a small s.

Not to mention all the bargains in the middle aisle...

There is a great British tradition of Scrooge-like clerics bemoaning the commercialisation of Christmas. So I'll simply agree with the poet John Betjeman, who commented wryly: *Some ways indeed are very odd, by which we hail the birth of God.*

But, leaving aside the food, drink, parties and presents, all of which I love at Christmas, what else is there?

For many of us it's about friends and family, the love we share and celebrate, made all the more precious now by two years of pandemic restrictions and this year's uncertainty over transport and travel plans.

Sometimes it's hard to believe that Christmas will ever be like it was, and across the world Christmas 2022 will be marked by loss and hardship.

Against this backdrop, is the Christmas story we've heard, so beautifully told in words and music, just a quaint tradition or religious fairy tale?

What relevance has it to our stricken, war-torn world, to our divided, strike-bound nation, to anxious and hurting families, to me?

How can we believe in Christmas this year?

I don't think it was ever easy to believe...

take those shepherds, for example.

A bunch of social outcasts, sleeping rough on the hills
above the occupied city, where conscripted soldiers and hard-pressed locals
impose Rome's latest rules and taxes –
maybe the shepherds are better off up here with a warm fire and an endless
sky....

Maybe, when everyone else is hurrying down to town, head down, weighed
down,
they still occasionally look up and out.

One of them glimpses the light, rouses the others.
They hear the message, from that endless sky, from heaven.
But they are utterly terrified!

None of them has ever seen an angel or been to a nativity play.

None of them is religious or knows any of the Scriptures that foretell this night.

None of them believes that God would want anything to do with them,
that they are good enough to go anywhere near an angel...

How can they possibly believe? Maybe we feel the same....

It's just an ordinary night's work for those shepherds,
but the angel finds them right where they are and says,
before anything else, 'Do *not* be afraid'.

It can indeed be scary to hear God !
Scary to let ourselves trust that what we can't prove may actually be true.
Scary to stop long enough to really hear God's message,
Scary to believe that it's for us, for me and you.

So the angel says to us too, *Do not be afraid.*
Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy
for all people

And somehow, the shepherds get the angels' message, believe it, act upon it
and share it...

Believing the message means finding the baby in the mucky stable,
not just watching the heavenly light show.

Believing the message means sharing it with other people – half of Bethlehem’s awake and buzzing by the time they go home for breakfast!

The shepherds believe and so they see for themselves.

And what they see is Christ, the Messiah and Saviour.

Not a distant King in a palace but God come to earth, right where they are, as a vulnerable human baby

He is the good news of great joy for all people. He is Emmanuel, God with us. Not a theory or a religion but a person, God in human form, who will live on earth and show us the way, who will give his life to save the world and send the Holy Spirit, God’s power and presence with us now and always.

The shepherds see Christ: they are chosen and invited to look into his face, the wondrous face of a newborn child. They believe and they see. They see and believe, and so can we. The invitation is for us too.

In a moment we will hear these words:

To all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God...

Will you dare to believe, or believe again, this Christmas? Dare to accept God’s invitation, as the shepherds did, to take him at his word and find Christ for yourself?

To believe that he comes to you wherever you are this year – in pain and loss, fear and confusion – he comes as God with us, right where we are.

Can we have a Christmas we can believe in?

Yes- by believing in Christ himself.

And that’s a Christmas the brochure might describe as

Big on Good News;

Big on Great Joy;

**Big on receiving and sharing God’s love in Christ,
and beyond price.**

A Christmas you can believe in, because of a Christ you can believe in.

Happy Christmas!