# Christmas laid bare

Well it couldn’t get much worse could it? A difficult end to a challenging year. Just when we thought we were turning the corner with the start of our vaccination programme, a new strain of this Coronavirus is discovered, infections levels are up, tighter restrictions on movement and contact introduced, planned family gatherings scrapped, and Christmas scaled down. On top of this we have had disruption at the channel ports, with possibly more to come a few days’ time!

It couldn’t get much worse for a young middle-eastern couple about 2000 years ago. Having discovered she was *unexpectedly* expecting, the young woman and her husband were forced to travel 70 miles to another town in order to comply with a government directive, her baby was due, almost all B&B’s fully booked and in desperation they spent the night in a shelter for farm animals. The baby arrived and, bizarrely they were visited by some grubby agricultural workers inspired, they said, by an encounter with some divine messengers. But this didn’t seem completely out of place, for the young woman had had her own spiritual encounter some nine months earlier and so pondered these things in her heart. It seems God had chosen this moment for something special.

For us, back in March and April when we were beginning to come to grips with the Pandemic it seemed the world as we knew it suddenly stopped. Amidst the anxiety and uncertainty new ways of life and work evolved. There even seemed to be some benefits. With travel restrictions pollution levels fell, the air became cleaner, mountain peaks became visible again. The value of local communities was appreciated, and we seemed to take more notice of the natural world around us. Creativity abounded. For some there was an awakening of an inner spirituality.

So we find ourselves with a Christmas like no other, not something we could have imagined a year ago. I have not been ‘out’ Christmas shopping, or been to any parties, eaten several Christmas dinners or attended endless Carol singing events! *(and it has been quite nice).*

We are not meeting any of our family over this time and our church diary has been very different. Our journey to Bethlehem this year has been unusual and yet it seems that through this ‘disruption’ of our normal Christmas we have been able to focus on its true message - without the trappings and layers of very worthwhile and enjoyable celebration we can see *Christmas laid bare.*

Maybe this is illustrated by the Nativity scene put up on behalf of Churches Together. There is a simplicity about the silhouettes representing Mary, Joseph and the humble surroundings of the stable. There is some significance in its position at the front of a much used public space and in just being there amongst the busyness of the Tuesday Market, whether noticed or not…

And the centrepiece is of course the manger. Just after it was set up one young child passing by was heard to say *‘ look… that’s where Jesus was born’.* The familiar words of Luke’s gospel tell us *‘she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn’ (Luke 2:7)* Here was Christmas laid bare. God living in humanity, choosing this moment to enter the disruption and uncertainty of our world. The writer of a modern worship song puts it this way *‘You laid aside you majesty, gave up everything for me’* echoing the words of the Apostle Paul who said Christ *‘emptied himself…* and was*… born in human likeness’.* Yet this was not what anyone was expecting, but God had chosen this moment for something special. This is what we celebrate on Christmas Day.

So let’s reflect on these words:

*Now heaven draws close*

*to the child in a manger,*

*divine food in a feeding trough.*

*Now the whole world trembles*

*with awe and wonder,*

*God has taken flesh and cries.*

Indeed this is Christmas laid bare.

