

## RECTOR'S PINT

I have been ordained for 30 years now, and for 26 of them, since becoming a vicar, I've been responsible for producing some thoughts to be published in parish newsletters at Christmas. I am very grateful that this was done by Toby Garfitt, last year when I was ill.

This is a difficult year in which to write such a letter. We have a 360-degree view of what can sometimes seem to be unremitting bad news! I don't need to list the issues many of us are aware of as we approach Christmas 2022.

What is Christmas about? For me, I think the reading we hear every year at our carol services sums it up. It comes from the first chapter of the Gospel of John: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

There have been many attempts to date the birth of Jesus, but nothing is conclusive. No date is given in the Bible, so why do we celebrate December 25th? Some speculate that December 25th was near the winter equinox, so marked mid-winter in the Northern Hemisphere. The Romans thought that this also marked the festival of Saturnalia which honoured the Roman God, Saturn, and that Christians merely 'appropriated' the date as a celebration of Christ's birth, so rather than the 'sun god', it was a celebration of the birth of 'God the Son'. In fact, the earliest recording of Christmas being on 25th December was not until 336AD, during the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, acknowledged as the first Christian Emperor. Personally, I think this gives weight to the story about the date being taken from a Roman festival, and it also suits that the Northern Hemisphere would have experienced midwinter at that time of year, with shorter days and longer nights, which would have emphasised this idea of the light shining in the darkness. This certainly works at our carol services, as the churches are lit by candlelight with the darkness outside.

But the words of John are not a comment on the time of year! They are a comment on the world in which we live, and God coming among us, as one of us. The place in which Jesus was born was deeply troubled, a small nation at the eastern end of an a repressive and often brutal empire. It was a dark and dangerous world. Let us not pretend that things are easy, they are not, but let us look again at the stories we celebrate each year. I believe that if we do, we will be able to see, once again that the light that shone still shines, or rather, He still shines, Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us.

Therefore, I wish you all the Peace of Christ this Christmas.

Simon