**If it were not there ....**

I wonder what you would miss most from Christmas if it were not there. Turkey, Christmas pudding, mince pies and other seasonal fare? The receiving and giving of presents? The Nine Lessons and Carols service from King's College Chapel? Cards with news from people that you do not hear from much, or at all, during the rest of the year? Santa Claus? Some time off from work? The Monarch’s speech? A Christingle service on Christmas Eve or a Christmas morning service? A Christmas tree with lights, ornaments and novelties? Crackers? Meeting up with family? Watching Christmas specials on television? A Boxing Day walk? All sorts of ingredients and traditions combine together to make Christmas for each of us. Take something important away and we would probably long for its return.

I also wonder what you would miss least about Christmas if it were not there. The long lead- up time? Repetitive Christmas music in the shops? Christmas-related adverts on television? Particular Christmas foods which do not delight your palate? Over-excessive packaging and wrapping of toys, toiletries and the like? A lack of 'Christmas spirit' in others? Charity appeals? Party games, like charades? Over-indulgence in food and/or alcohol? Repeats of programmes on television? The commercialisation of it all? Some aspects of Christmas are less attractive to us and we would not miss them at all if they were not present.

Then what about the story at the centre of Christmas? What would you miss most and least about it if it were not there? The long family tree in Matthew’s gospel, giving Jesus’ ancestry, or the account of the more immediate family connections to John the Baptist in Luke? The appearance of the Angel Gabriel to Mary to tell her about the forthcoming birth of her son, Jesus, or the angel’s message in the dream that Joseph had about Jesus’ arrival? The eloquent words from the beginning of John’s gospel about the ‘Word’ becoming flesh or the more ordinary Bethlehem birth narrative in Luke? The visit of the shepherds or the journey of the wise men? The recording of the religious observances that were carried out after Jesus’ birth (circumcision and purification) or the story of the holy family’s escape to Egypt? The meetings with Simeon and Anna in the temple in Jerusalem or the slaughter of the innocent infants by King Herod?

Some parts of the story surrounding Jesus’ birth can appeal to us more than others. We might feel that if certain episodes were not there we would not really miss them. Yet even those bits that may appear a little tedious (like the genealogy in Matthew) or that seem abhorrent (like the killing of the under-twos) have insights to bring to us. Each part has a reason for being there. Perhaps, this year, you might look more closely at the part of the Christmas story that you think you would miss least if it were not there, and see what God might be saying through it.

May you know that God is with you this Christmas-time,

Philip

Revd Philip Peacock