

Sermon – 24th December 2018 – 11.30 pm

I wonder whether you have a favourite Christmas advert this year? John Lewis always get a lot of publicity for their Christmas advert, and this year is no exception, having chosen to feature Elton John getting his first piano. And then there's the Heathrow advert, with the teddy bears deciding to go home for Christmas, and Paul Young singing "Every time you go away" in the background. There are two adverts that seem to be constantly on the television when I'm watching – the Morrison's free from range, with a boy encouraging his little sister to be brave and feed a reindeer, put the star on the top of the Christmas tree, and deliver her lines in the Christmas play; and the Thornton's advert, with a pilot returning home for Christmas, armed with chocolates, and wife/girlfriend rushing down the stairs to greet him.

Of course nothing beats the adverts of my childhood – the iconic yellow pages ad with the little boy climbing onto the yellow pages in order to kiss the girl under the mistletoe, not to mention the festive Coca Cola lorries, lighting up the winter scene as the roll into town.

What strikes me about Christmas advertisements is that to a large extent they are all seeking to tap into the same human emotions. More often than not they focus on those relationships that are the most important in our lives. There is a strong sense that Christmas is about family, and often we are drawn into a feeling of nostalgia for those mythical perfect Christmases of our childhood.

A few years ago, a Christmas advert for a German supermarket went viral. It told the story of a grandfather, spending Christmas after Christmas alone while his family were too busy building successful careers to come home. Finally, in order to have a family Christmas, he faked his own death, asking how else he would get everyone together. All rather extreme for a supermarket advert, we might feel – but there's a deeper point being made in there somewhere.

Christmas is undoubtedly about relationships. John's gospel begins: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Relationship is at the heart of the incarnation – the birth of Jesus – because there is an everlasting relationship between God and Jesus. The Word – Jesus – was *with* God. Always has been and always will be. God is all about relationship. Our relationship with God. And our relationships with one another.

The story of Christmas – of Jesus being born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago – is the story of a God who wants to be with us. With you and me. So to want to be with one another at Christmastime reflects what lies at the very heart of the story, as does showing our love for one another through the giving and receiving of gifts. To that extent the adverts seem to understand the message of Christmas.

But it won't surprise you to hear that I don't really think the adverts tell the whole story. And that is partly *because* they connect so easily with some of our deepest longings. There is something about the perfection of the Christmases presented to us on television that potentially leaves us all feeling a little disappointed and inadequate. Of course that's the advertiser's intention – to convince us that disappointment will be averted if only we purchase the right food, gifts, decorations etc. etc.. But that's really to miss the point of Christmas.

I feel reasonably confident in saying that you, like me, will be able to look back on a variety of experiences of the festive season, positive and negative. The magical and joyful takes its place alongside the disappointments and arguments. There are years when things come together well, and

other years when, for whatever reason, Christmas just doesn't work out as we might hope, or we're just not in a place to join in the festivities.

And this, for me, starts to get to the point of what Christmas is *really* about. You see, God chooses to be with us. You and me. As we are. And that last part is so very important. The birth of Jesus is about God knowing what it is like to have lives like you and me. Real lives. With ups and downs. Things that work and things that don't. Joys and celebrations; sadnesses and failures. God's love for us extends beyond our ability to cook the best turkey, choose the most perfect gift. It is a love for us, as we are.

As you can probably imagine, I get to see a lot of nativity plays at this time of year. One of the things that I find the most enchanting about them is the bits that don't quite go to plan. It's not that I want to laugh at either the children or those who have prepared them, but there is something about the imperfection that just rings true. It's lovely to have our images of that first Christmas with Mary and Joseph sitting beside the manger with baby Jesus sleeping as everyone comes to visit. But in the little hiccups, I am reminded that life isn't really like that. And God knows that. God knows what real life is like – what it feels like when things don't go to plan.

Sometimes it is when things go wrong that I end up seeing the *real* meaning of Christmas. The patience of tired teachers; their encouragement and perseverance in the face of adversity; their desire for the children to feel good about themselves.

My least favourite Christmas adverts are those for perfume and aftershave, most of which use a celebrity, suggesting that by buying a particular scent, we can become another person. But that misses the point that God made us to be us. It doesn't help the world one bit if I become like Julia Roberts, Jennifer Lawrence, or whoever else it is that is trying to sell me perfume this Christmas. Where I see the real beauty of Christmas in nativities are the times when it is clear that the teachers and children have different skills. Some are good at music; some at costumes; some at acting; some at pulling it together when it seems to be falling apart; some at remaining calm; some at being positive regardless; some at comforting those for whom it has all gone wrong. But most of all, they're good at being themselves.

God's love for us is good news not just because it means we are accepted even if we don't manage to produce the perfect Christmas. It is also good news because it is when we know that we are loved that more becomes possible. That we find it in ourselves to love just a little bit more. That our own anxieties can be transformed, allowing us to reach out to others, and celebrate the gifts we see in ourselves and others.

However this Christmas works out for you, may you know that you are loved, just as you are, and be ready to share that love with others.

Amen