

2014-12-21 Sue Diggory

9 Lessons and Carols 2014

When does Christmas begin?

When does Christmas begin for you?

Christmas cards start creeping into the shops in August, the big tins of Quality Street and Heroes are on the shelves by September, and before the end of October we are being urged to order the Turkey and by November some Christmas trees are up and decorated.

Or maybe it is in early December with that first chocolate from the Advent Calendar, or the first Christmas card that lands on the doormat.

For me it's that spine tingling moment at 3.00 o'clock on Christmas Eve when the congregation of King's College Cambridge has settled, and like tonight a lone pure voice begins the first verse of Once in Royal David's City.

There in the kitchen, often surrounded by sprout peelings is for me that magical moment when each year I know once again that Christmas has really begun!

But the question I would like us to ponder for a few moments tonight is when did it actually begin, when in the story that we have heard unfold once again did Christmas really begin, and when do we want it to end?

Was it when the Angel Gabriel came to Mary with the news that *"you will give birth to a son" ... who will be "the Son of the most high"*

Was it in the darkness of the stable when *"the time came for the baby to be born"* and placed in a manger *"because there was no room for them in the inn."*

Or was it, like today's Christmas celebrations something that began a long time before the actual event, many years before in another dark place?

Could it possibly have begun at the beginning of time, when order came out of chaos, light came out of darkness and the world began as a place that *"was good"*. Was it there at the beginning of time that the Christmas story began with the work of creation?

We can argue about how long it took and exactly how it all happened, and of course we do; sometimes logically and sometimes not, sometimes with little real interest and sometimes with great passion, but Christians agree that God, Father, Son and Spirit were all there at the beginning, and I suggest that that was where the story began, when *"the Word was with God in the beginning."*

The story that is all about putting right the rift between God and his creation, by the 'getting ready' of God's people for a second dark night when God was at work in the darkness once again, but this time in a different way, this time as a baby, a vulnerable little baby, come to be with us in human form, so that the rift could begin to be healed as *"the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us"*

This was the good news the Angels told the Shepherds about, the good news that made them leave their sheep and run to the stable, this was the good news that made the Wise Men follow the star and travel for many months in search of a king. This was the good news that makes the Christmas 'crib' scene complete – Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, the Shepherds and the Wise Men.

So is this where the story ends; in a couple of weeks time when the decorations go away, when the tree comes down and when the post Christmas diet begins; or is the end of Christmas a bit like the beginning of Christmas, something that happens a long distance from the actual event.

Can I suggest that there is another dark night that is part of the story?

Not the chaos of the beginning of time, nor the cosy stable, which most likely wasn't at all cosy, but rather draughty and smelly, this time in the darkness of a tomb cut in rock where "*early on the first day of the week while it was still dark*" the next part of the story unfolded. God had been at work once again, death had been defeated and on Easter Day the rift between God and his people was finally no more.

For us this is the next part of the Christmas story, the story that begins in the darkness of creation when God said '*Let there be light*' becomes a reality in the darkness of the stable, with the birth of Jesus when "*the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*" and is completed when Jesus did not stay in the darkness of the Easter tomb but burst into new life on Easter day.

So perhaps another question for us to reflect on this Christmas is not only when does Christmas begin, but when do we want it to end.

Will we make sure that we don't let go of the real meaning of Christmas, by putting our trust in Jesus, the one who loves us and cares for us, not just at Christmas time; but all the time.

If we are prepared to allow the light of the Christ child to shine into the centre of our lives, we will find purpose and meaning and hope for the future and we will not be at risk of putting all the mystery and wonder of Christmas away with the decorations at the beginning of next year.

Amen.