

A friend told us all via Facebook that he'd seen a local café removing its Christmas tree. Not remarkable, except that it was on Christmas Eve. You'll often hear clergy saying how good it would be to celebrate Christmas 'properly'. If you were to press us, we would say that Christmas starts on Christmas Day, and the celebrations strictly begin then, not before. Wouldn't it be a joy, we say, to proclaim Messiah's birth for the twelve days of Christmas, and indeed all the way through Epiphany on January 6th to Candlemas on February 2nd, the end of this great celebration of the Incarnation.

But then our faces fall, as we look at the magnitude of the task, the Carol services which began here on December 3rd, the Christmas consumer festivals in November, the fake snow on the windows from October half term. It's a losing battle, and we give in and reflect that it's just a pity that as a result we lose the wonderful season of Advent.

The thing is, when you examine the reality of the church's calendar, you are brought up short by what the celebration of the Christmas season actually means. Set aside the holy days, St Stephen on the 26th, and St John on the 27th, and my predecessor here, Thomas Becket on the 29th, and their combined stories of persecution, exile and martyrdom – the holy days invade the liturgical year a bit like having a significant birthday in the middle of a working week. The season itself causes enough problems.

Did you wince at the gospel reading? Straight after the loveliness of Matthew's telling of the birth of Jesus we face up to the massacre of the innocent children of Bethlehem, the ruthlessly effective psychopathic tactics of Herod the Great, the forced repatriation of the Holy Family (and what were they if not immigrants, and asylum seekers). This is a bit like finding an uncooked bit of the turkey, a mouldy christingle orange, a Marks and Spencer present without a receipt so you can't take it back, a relative you can't face who invites themselves round at a time you don't want. Or the news of the death of another much loved star when all you want is a nice picture of the Queen and pictures of children sledging.

Yet is this not what distinguishes the fantasy Christmas from the real one? Are not these difficult events already there in the lovely stories of Christmas? There's an unmarried mother, a temporarily homeless family, a shattered people in an occupied land, a King who would stop at nothing to get his way, a child met by outcast shepherds and suspect mystics from another faith, disturbing proclamations about the life of the child and hints that his life would not be his own, that he would be distinguished by his life on the edge of society, his death for the life of the world. No wonder Mary 'pondered these things in her heart.'

All the world's latent cruelty and violence erupts in Herod's calculated paranoia. No matter that Bethlehem was a small place, that there may have been just 20 or 30 children, that this was, according to some, a commonplace event in a place which made the wild west look like afternoon tea in the Home Counties. No matter that people were displaced as a matter of course in those days. We just know, deep in our bones, that all of this is wrong. The death of one child in these circumstances, the displacement of one family because of the threat of violence, is wrong.

And our Christmas must be robust enough to cope with the fact that there was such wrong then and that there is such wrong now. My Christmas had to be robust enough twenty two years ago to cope with a couple whose baby I had baptised in November and whom they found dead on Christmas morning. It was not tinsel and crackers which helped them - if anything it mocked them. But the fragility of the Christ child, his life in appalling times and his death for them and their child was the beginning of light in their darkness.

The Incarnation, the coming of the word made flesh, is important not only because of astrologers and angels and its supernatural wonder, but also because of the universal tenderness of parents and child, because of the reality of the situation in which they found themselves - one which is familiar to the majority of the world's population in some form or other - because of the fragility of life and the waywardness and downright evil of human beings. The Incarnation is important because it points to how flawed human beings can be redeemed through the embracing of our humanity by the divine.

I can't explain why the world is as it is, why what Herod did has been replicated across the world since, and in Aleppo in the last few weeks. It needs a lifetime's thinking and prayer. But I can grasp that God entered all of this and avoided none of it. We can turn the TV off and just not read that bit of the paper. But God, cannot escape it and chooses not to avoid it. Rather, God has this in his DNA and in the experience of Christ, and absorbs it such that Jesus died because of it, and destroys its ultimate power.

The journey of the days of Christmas, travelled openly, leads us into the grief of parents and the experience of the refugee. It points us to the glory of God and the brokenness of the world. It may make party hats a little redundant. But it is the only hope for our healing, and will give substance to our faith, not fuel for our fantasising. With shepherds and angels may we find in the Christ child a saviour and deliverer, for our sake, for the world's sake and for God's sake, to whom be all glory now and ever. Amen.