

Dear Friends

'It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas...'

Except it isn't.

We are about to experience a Christmas like we've never had before. Whichever tier we find ourselves within by the time Christmas comes, this year's celebrations will feel rather alien.

As I've been planning for Christmas and reflecting on the situation, I've found myself noticing the alienation in the Christmas story itself. It is not a normal occurrence. The terms 'uncharted territory' and 'unprecedented times' could just as easily be applied to the story of Jesus' birth as they have been applied so often to the Covid-19 pandemic.

There's the unique conception, the prophetic fulfilment, and the personal stories of Mary and Joseph – all of which are completely unprecedented even if they have become so familiar to us that we hardly notice. But if we look closer, we see Jesus' parents alienated from family and friends through travel for the census and possibly through cultural taboos about being pregnant without being married. We find that the baby Jesus drawing his first breath far from the comforts of home and amongst strangers from the fields or far away. Next, the story skips to a dramatic escape in the night as Jesus and his parents flee Herod's annihilation of infants and become further alienated in Egypt.

Jesus' early life was spent in uncharted circumstances; affected by the currents of national and global politics, the demands of the political class upon those who had to obey, the fight for survival in an uncertain world and the strangeness of a new environment in a foreign place. For Jesus and his parents, this perfect storm meant that everything had changed. All familiarity was gone. They were stripped of security and left at the mercy of God.

Perhaps that first Christmas actually has more in common with Christmas 2020 than we realise?

As we find ourselves unable to celebrate as normal, unable to meet with friends and family freely, and unable to enjoy the traditions of Christmas past; perhaps this year is the one where we will come into direct contact afresh with the fragility and daring of the plan by which God sent his only son into the world. Perhaps the anxiety, loneliness and sense of our own mortality that we feel this year, unlike other Christmases, could be the key that links our lives with the original Christmas story again in a meaningful way. Perhaps seeing how God moved throughout the nativity story will enable us to see again how God moves in each of our lives, even in the midst of a pandemic.

I pray we all have a good Christmas, connecting again with this unprecedented and unique occurrence through which God's Messiah comes to us, lives with us, and eventually dies for us.

Amen.

Steve