

With

Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-14

St Martin-in-the-Fields is a landmark church in the heart of London. It is a hospitable, vibrant and forward thinking community with worship at its heart.

The church exists to honour God by being an open and inclusive church that enables people to question and discover for themselves the significance of Jesus Christ. Taking their inspiration from their patron saint Martin, they seek to be a place of welcome and hospitality for all. You may be familiar with their annual Christmas appeal, which is usually for that Church's committed and imaginative work with the many homeless people who congregate around the city centre of London.

Recently I read something written by the vicar of St Martin's, Sam Wells. He was writing about the most important word in the Christmas story:¹

I want to describe to you three scenes that I'm guessing will be familiar to many here. And then I want to think with you about what these three scenes have in common.

The first is your relationship with the most difficult member of your family. You're out there in the shops buying presents for most of your friends and colleagues and family But somehow you have no idea what to give this one difficult individual. It bothers you because deep down it feels like your inability to know what present will make them happy is symbolic of your lifelong confusion about what might truly make your them happy – especially where you're concerned.

So in the end you spend more than you meant to on something you don't really believe he wants, throwing money at the problem and inwardly cursing yourself because you know what

you're buying isn't the answer. When Christmas Day comes and they open the present, you see in their forced smile and their half-hearted thanks that you've failed yet again to do something for them that might overcome the chasm between you.

Here's a second scene. You have family or friends from out of town coming for Christmas. You want everything to be perfect for them and you exchange a flurry of emails about who's going to sleep where, and whether it's all right for them to bring the dog. You get into a frenzy of shopping and cooking, and you're actually a little anxious that you'll forget something or burn something, so your kitchen becomes your empire, and you can't bear anyone interrupting you, and even at Christmas dinner you're mostly checking the gravy, flambéing the pudding. Yet as you say goodbye to your guests you hug and say, 'It's a shame we never really talked while you were here', and when they've finally gone, you collapse in a heap, maybe in tears of exhaustion.

Here's the third scene. You feel there's something empty or lacking in the cosy Christmas with family and friends, and your heart is breaking for people having a tough time in the cold, in isolation, in poverty, or in grief. So you gather together presents for children of prisoners or turn all your Christmas gifts into vouchers representing your support for building a house, or buying a cow for some overseas village who need the resources more than you and your friends do.

What do all of these scenes have in common? I think they might be all based on the tiny word 'for'. When we care about people finding Christmas tough; when we want our house guests to enjoy their Christmas visit; when we feel our relationship with a relative is faltering – our instinct is to do something 'for' them. It seems that the word that epitomises being an admirable person, that sums up the spirit of Christmas, is the word, 'for'. These are often good gestures, warm-

hearted, and in some cases sacrificial and noble. But somehow, might it be, that they don't go to the heart of the problem. 'For' doesn't dismantle resentment; doesn't overcome misunderstanding; doesn't deal with alienation; doesn't overcome isolation.

Most of all, 'for' isn't the way God celebrates Christmas. God doesn't set the world right at Christmas. God doesn't shower us with good things at Christmas. 'For' isn't what God shows us at Christmas. It would be great if that's what God did. But despite the misconceptions of some Christians about God being like some kind of spiritual Father Christmas, sorting all problems and fixing all difficulties; and despite the persistent misconception of most new atheists who believe that's what Christians think God is, this is **not** what God offers to us at Christmas.

In the different 'Christmas' stories in the Bible – where Matthew has the angel telling Joseph that the child's name should be 'Emmanuel...God with us'; and John giving his summary statement of what Christmas means, "The Word became flesh and lived among (or with) us." That's the word. That's the most important little word in the Christmas story, lying right at the heart of Christmas and right at the heart of what Christians believe. The word is 'with'.

Could it be that that is the most important word in the Bible – the word that describes the heart of God and the nature of God's purpose and destiny for us? And that word is 'with'. God's whole life and action and purpose are shaped to be **with** us.

'With' is in many ways a lot harder than 'for'. You can do 'for' without a conversation, without a real relationship, without talking about what matters, without changing your views and your attitudes and prejudices. 'With' seems to ask more of us than simply what we give. We'd all prefer to keep charity on the level of 'for', where it can't hurt us, or maybe even change us. Gift-

giving; hospitality sharing; charity donating – these are truly wonderful things, but might it just be that beyond generosity with our money, the C21st deficit has more to do with the gift of our time. Being ‘with’ your family and friends, including the difficult ones; allowing others to help and assist in the sharing of hospitality, rather than trying to do it all on your own; and in your charity donation – what the isolated, grieving or impoverished people of the world, and our own country, usually need is not just our gifts and money, but our concerned presence with them who really cares about them as people, not as a project. It’s the ‘with’ and not the ‘for’ that is needed in our world today. Does your doing ‘for’ arise out of a fundamental commitments to be ‘with’, or is your doing ‘for’ driven by your profound desire to avoid the discomfort, the challenge, the patience, the loss of control involved in being ‘with’?

With those older people, and others, who are part of the C21st epidemic of loneliness and isolation in our country; with the young parents in your family or circle of friends who feel overwhelmed with their work and with their family responsibilities; with the people who have poor mental health who come into our public spaces and rarely get a smile of friendship, let alone a word of greeting; with the person who comes to a food bank with more embarrassment than we could ever imagine, needing to find support, and not just charity; with the Syrians and Iraqis and Afghanis and Africans fleeing war and famine and drought and persecution, and not grudgingly accepting the lowest possible amount of response we can make being enough. With the cancer sufferer; with the bereaved; with the jobless; with the angry; with the doubting; with the fragile soul whose relationship has just crashed and burned.

For me, this Christmas Eve, what is glorious and wonderful, almost incredible, is the Good News that God didn't settle on 'for'. At Christmas God says unambiguously, 'I am with; I am with you. God has not abolished 'for' – there are plenty of things we need to do 'for' the people around us. But God, this night, of all nights, in becoming human, has said that there will never again be a 'for' that's not based on a fundamental, unalterable, everlasting, utterly unswerving 'with'. That's the good news of Christmas.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Samuel Wells, A Nazareth Manifesto, p1ff