

CATHEDRAL CAROL SERVICE 2011

‘A funny thing happened as I walked along Oxford Street with the Organist.’ So might a certain kind of novel begin, but this is true.

Across the road was a large chemist’s shop – or pharmacy, as we call them these days. I probably shouldn’t mention its name, but it has a strong connection with footwear.

Anyway, the front of the store was all lit up, and in the middle, in huge letters, were two words in flashing lights: ‘**Love Christmas**’.

What was it trying to say? Was it ‘Love Christmas’! as in ‘I love Christmas’; or ‘Love Christmas?’ a question expecting the answer ‘yes’.

Or was it an order: ‘Love Christmas! - or else...’ as you queue with your prescription or basket of gifts?

Let’s assume it was a question: ‘Love Christmas?’ Well, the Cathedral is full of people this evening, just as it has been for all the preceding Carol Services, and as I expect it has been at Christmas-time for 903 years. Plainly, we do love Christmas, or we would not be here...would we?

Is it because everybody loves the innocence of it all? Or because carols remind us of Christmas past? Or because it offers reassurance, helping us to escape reality for an hour or so?

Or could it be for a deeper – if subliminal – reason? Could it be, at a very difficult time for many people in our country and across the world, that we want the Christmas message to be true; that we want the song of the angels – ‘Peace on earth, goodwill to all people’, to be real?

Underneath the trappings, the lights, for many, the awkward social obligations of the season, the ambiguous message on the pharmacy, lies an earth-changing event.

Those of us who have the gift of faith know that this child, born in a manger, was – and is – the Messiah, so long expected: the incarnate Son of God; that is, the God of the universe, revealed in human form: ‘Emanuel, God with us’.

In his short life, Jesus showed, by his actions and by his words, a new way of living – a way which showed God’s special blessing on the unlikely ones. They are a far cry from those who most of us value or count as blessed, but that’s just the point.

That is why Christmas matters: because God offers a new and different way of living, and invites each of us – in the words of St Richard of Chichester – to know Jesus more clearly, to love Him more dearly and to follow Him more nearly.

Each day, people come to this cathedral to light a candle and say a prayer. Many of these are written down, and we offer them at the altar each morning. Often they move us greatly. I found this one the other day, left by an anonymous visitor:

O God, my life seems a puzzle, and faith makes no sense of it. Lead me out of darkness into light, out of confusion into certainty, out of the storm into calm waters. Put my mind at rest and give me and my family peace this Christmas...please!

‘Love Christmas?’ I know why I do.
