



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

When I was a boy at Christmas, my dad used to love telling me a great story about Father Christmas. He'd say that he had a hole in his sack of presents and Smarties leaked out so you could tell where he had been around the house. On Christmas morning, I'd wake up giddy with excitement to not just a stocking at the end of my bed, but also a Smartie trail to follow. I've carried on this tradition with my own kids. And they will pass it on to theirs.

However, there is another, even more exciting trail to follow. It also begins with a story.

Just like all the great stories we love to share during this festive season, often around the dinner with our families, it is the truly life-changing story of the birth of Jesus Christ. The gift of God come down to earth.

I've even had a go at writing my own version of this Christmas story. It's called The Sleepy Shepherd. It's about a shepherd who misses the story, but finds out years later what it was all about.

For me the greatest joy of Christmas is sharing and hearing afresh the greatest story ever told. When we discover this story, we find that we are no longer able to think about God in the same way. God is no longer distant or separate. God is the down-to-earth God; the God with a human face. Christ is the beginning and the end of Christmas (there is a clue in the title!) and this gives substance to all the other things I love, such as the eating and drinking, the silly party games and the good company of those I love, and even all the other things I do around Christmas, such as visiting hospitals and prisons or simply decorating the Christmas tree or sending cards to those I won't see but still love dearly.

The end of the story isn't actually the manger in Bethlehem. It is the hope that this child brings to the world.

The story of the last couple of years has been incredibly difficult. It's left many feeling of us feeling deeply uncertain, even hopeless. We want to hear a message telling us Covid is over. We want to gather freely with our friends and families. But we are not there yet.

However, this Christmas hope does change things. It helps us see beyond ourselves. It shines out in the extraordinary goodness that I've seen in people this year, often ordinary people doing extraordinary things to love and support their neighbours.

I love Christmas because it tells me that the world is more beautiful and more meaningful than I realised. It shows me I am loved. It shows me that there is hope.

Mary says yes to God, and the world is changed. I love Christmas because it is my chance to say yes as well; to begin to build a better world.

The master storyteller Charles Dickens - whose book A Christmas Carol millions will read and watch in various forms over this festive period -

once wrote a book to fire up his own children's imaginations about the story of Jesus Christ.

In *The Life of Our Lord* he writes that 'everybody ought to know about Him. No one ever lived who was so good, so kind, so gentle and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in any way ill or miserable.'

It's my prayer that everyone takes the opportunity this Christmas to explore and discover the gift of Jesus for themselves. The share it with others.

May He bring you light and hope now and in the years to come.

Happy Christmas!

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