

St Peter's, Ealing
Monday 25th December 2017
Christmas Day

Oh Christmas tree! Oh Christmas tree!

Could you imagine Christmas without a Christmas tree? Impossible I hear you cry. Indeed, the tree is probably the first thing we get when Christmas approaches. I was quite surprised how early the Christmas tree seller was in Christ the Saviour Churchyard this year. But he did a roaring trade from the outset and I am pretty sure, by the time he stopped selling last week he had very few left.

When I was young I couldn't wait to get the tree up in our house. My mum was quite strict though and we weren't allowed to put the tree up until Christmas eve. But when it went up you truly felt Christmas had arrived. All full of baubles and tinsel, flashing lights and a star on the top. Magical!

The tree has lots of meaning in and outside the Christian tradition. It is a pagan symbol of hope and promise. Christians took this on many centuries ago as a remembrance of God's promise during cold dark winter, of life and hope and salvation. Its green leaves standing out among the bare branches of the regular trees. In medieval days the people would decorate cedar trees with fruits to remind them of the tree of life in the garden of Eden and the story of creation. Martin Luther introduced the idea of lights on trees to remind us of the sparkly stars in the night sky when Jesus was born.

It is no accident a tree is used to reflect on the carpenter in the story of salvation. It has also a custom in places to strip the tree after the festivities and prepare it to become a cross at Easter. The tree then combines the birth of the Christ child with his saving act in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord of life.

There is a poignancy to this story of Christmas. We focus on this wonderful act of creation, the birth of a human being; the fresh soft skin of the new born, the joy birth brings, the happiness of the parents. Over shadowing this story is what is to come. We know the story and no matter how much we might want to bury ourselves in tinsel and sherry, we cannot hide from its conclusion.

Today we celebrate the birth of a child; in a few months we will travel with him to the cross of Golgotha and the empty garden tomb. Today we celebrate the birth of Emmanuel, God with us. We can only celebrate this birth because we know that it brings, through the tree of shame, the salvation of the world.

The joy we celebrate today is not that of a new born but what that new born means for us. Today God has placed in the world a gift which is the forgiveness of our sins and a right relationship with God. We are forgiven. All those horrible or niggling things that make us lesser people are washed away. We are made new, we are changed, we are the new birth in this child. We have a new beginning, let us rejoice and give thanks for God is with us. As we break bread together and share the common cup of God's grace, be renewed and deepened in our desire and intension to follow Jesus who is our Lord and Saviour.