

Can you remember what you were doing five weeks and three days ago? I can! I didn't get home until about 1.30am., and then I was back in church a few hours later to lead the Christmas morning service. It seems an absolute age ago. Yet, going by our church calendar, we are still in the Christmas season.

The church has a fondness for forty-day 'seasons'. The forty days of Lent end with the glorious celebrations of Easter Day, and the forty-day Easter season runs to Ascension and is followed ten days later by the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But Christmas doesn't seem to work the same way. It almost reminds me of that splendid misprint of TS Eliot: 'This is the way the world shall end: not with a banger but a Wimpey'. Who still feels Christmassy? Whose decorations are still up? Whose Christmas tree is still slowly dropping needles in the corner of the living room? I thought not! Somehow, most of our Christmas festivities happen well before Christmas itself. By Boxing Day (which, by the way, is the Feast of Stephen on which Good King Wenceslas paused from his own Christmas partying for long enough to look out of the window) – by Boxing Day we're all glad to get back to normal. Though I must admit that it is pleasant not to have my ears assaulted by Christmas muzak every time I go into a shop.

But here at St Peter's today is the final day of Christmas, and it is a day that has three names. (I seem to remember having mentioned this once or twice before.) One of them, Candlemas, dates from the fourth century and refers to the ancient ritual in which we shall take part later in the service. The other two – the older 'Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary' and the newer 'Presentation of Christ in the Temple' – both link us back to the realities of life in first-century Palestine. The first few days after childbirth were dangerous, both for mother and baby. If they survived that very risky period, the family took the new baby to the temple to give thanks for a safe birth and, following Jewish tradition, if the child was their first son, to dedicate him to God. Our Gospel reading recounts this, and describes how two people recognised Jesus as the Messiah. They weren't priests, temple officials, Pharisees or Sadducees - just two very ordinary prayerful Jews, one man and one woman. Once Joseph and Mary had done what was required of them, they went home and lived a very normal life while Jesus grew up.

In the same way, today we move on from the celebration of Christmas, accepting that the mystery and the miracle of Christ's incarnation is not just for that special brief period, but that it goes with us everywhere. The crib has been our Christmas symbol – we began by placing the Christ Child in the manger. We should close Christmas with the same reverence and with equal meaning.

The shepherds were the first visitors, following the angel summons and curious to come and see. Our crib shepherds have already gone, but here is one of my own crib figures and a sheep to represent them. Who is always curious – always wants to know what's going on – maybe has research as part of their job? Come and take the shepherds.

The Wise Men had a long journey before they reached Jesus. Is there anyone who is a long way from home? A visitor to this church? Someone who travels a lot? Come and take the Wise Men.

The animals lived in the stable – it was their home. Who feels that church is a home for them? Who has animals for company at home? Come and take the ox and the donkey.

Joseph often seems to be on the sidelines. He's at the back of the scene, a decent man who is astounded by events but trusting and protective of his family. Is there a father here who sympathises with Joseph? Come and take him.

Mary has coped with everything – the discovery that she is to have a baby, the long journey, the birth, the unexpected comings and goings, the new experience of caring for a tiny child. Is there a young mother here today? Come and take Mary for a well-deserved rest.

Finally there is Jesus. Father David carried him to the manger on Christmas night; now he will carry him carefully back to Mary and Joseph.

We won't move the straw. It was left behind when everyone else had gone. But we will close the door and leave the stable in peace. Mary kept the extraordinary events of Christmas quietly in her heart, and thought about them often in the time that followed. So, at the end of this Christmas season, we take the light of Christ into our hearts and out into the everyday world.