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Dear friends,

'Get your Christmas here'. So runs the sign outside a business that you may have seen. The shop in question is selling many fine items. Numerous decorations, to brighten up a house during a dark and damp winter's day. Cards to remind long lost acquaintances that we still recall them, at least once a year. Festive food designed to give us a satisfied glow. Numerous gift items to fulfil our imagined desires of others. Glittering paper to give the gifts that special sparkle. What more could you need? There is nothing wrong in all of this, but surely it is not quite enough. A little more is needed.

Christmas is a time for nostalgia. Happy memories of a magical childhood times spent in front of a crackling fire. Thoughts of gifts that Santa would bring to a good boy or girl. Icicles dangling from the eave outside the window. Running to put on warm gloves and a scarf so that a snowman could be made. Happy memories. The disillusion of adulthood wipes them away. No wonder we love the idea of the village Victorian evening. We can dress up, me included, and live a little Dickensian fantasy for a couple of hours. All good fun and nothing wrong with that. Last year the village was awash with people. With the road closed this year, we all imagine there will be even more people enjoying the fun of the evening. Nothing wrong in that at all. But is it enough? Is more needed?

Of course you would expect me to say that much more is needed. Sometimes it is as if we focus on the packaging and have nothing in the package. Birmingham City Council was heavily criticised in recent years for wanting to put up the sign Winterval for a secular winter celebration. Perhaps they were just being honest. For if you remove the reason for Christmas from your thinking, what are you left with? Consumption and a celebration of mid-winter. Our pagan ancestors knew how to celebrate in that way, and so does our world today. So let us

follow suit and adorn our houses with polar bears and penguins and consign donkeys and sheep to the nonsense we were taught in our youth. Instead of sending presents, or indeed 'alternative gifts' to charities to help with aid projects in Africa and Asia, let us send a donation to have 'There probably is no God' as a slogan on the side of our buses. That message will gladden any heart. Eat, drink and be merry, after-all, that is surely the reason for the season. How can there be anything wrong in that? That must be enough! Nothing more could be needed! Cheers!!

Or maybe, just maybe, it is not enough. There is a real emptiness, a shallowness. A dim and distant memory of singing of angels and an extra-ordinary night in a little town called Bethlehem. How a baby in a manger with no crib for a bed was born on a starry night when the earth lay sleeping clear and still. How three kings travelled across moor and mountain to follow a star. How the whole world was and is invited to sing, "Oh come let us adore him, Christ the Lord". And what does that mean? What difference did it make then? What difference has it made down through the ages? What possible difference could it make now in the new promised land of Obama and Youtube, of Ipods and plasma screens?

Every year we explore again this great mystery. Of the Son of God born among mortal men. That ancient story that challenges us again and again. The beginning of an extra-ordinary life that we can read about and wonder. Of miracles and wondrous teaching. Of death and resurrection. Of God's Spirit sent to change us and challenge us.

My friends, I am thrilled that so many of us locally know that it is not enough to celebrate Christmas without considering the great events at Bethlehem in church. We have added an extra crib service at Ingatestone this year. Across our two churches that gives services on Christmas Eve afternoon and evening at 3, 4, 5.30. 7.30 and 11.30. On Christmas Day morning at 8, 9.45 and 11.15. Spent time with us to add that little more and complete your Christmas.

Yours in Christ, *Patrick*