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Dear friends,

Christmas will soon be upon us. For some people, 'upon us' can feel like the correct phraseology by which to describe Christmas. The season can appear to bring with it so many burdens. Then there is the enforced feeling of jollity. How many "Ho, Ho Ho" 's can they take? Of course it was different when they were young. Then Christmas was exciting, with gifts to anticipate and all the sparkle and glitter to brighten up those dark winter evenings. Somewhere along the passage of the years the sparkle has gone.

I hope that does not describe your feelings in the season of Advent. Jesus said that to enter the kingdom of God we had to become like little children. At no time of the year is this saying more obvious than at Advent and Christmas. Everyone is saddened at the commercialization of Christmas. It used to be called the season of goodwill. Now sometimes it can feel like the season of good deal! Yet, theologically it is both. It is a season to remember the goodwill of God towards humanity. Why else would he come to earth in the form of his son as a small and helpless baby, born amongst poverty, unless he loved humanity beyond our ability to describe? The result of this extra-ordinary action was not just a good deal, but a great deal, the best deal that humanity could receive. This helpless baby would give the best teaching possible by which anyone could live their life. Because of his dying on the cross, this baby would enable the possibility for any of us to be acceptable when our earthly life is finished. So Advent is a wonderful time of anticipation and Christmas a great time for celebrations, for if you really understand the significance, there is a great deal to celebrate.

A report in October revealed the frightening level of loneliness and isolation felt by so many older people in Britain. It stated that many will go a whole month with never actually having a conversation with anyone. Sadly there are many people in our communities who fit this category. We still have many good

people who do indeed practice the lost art of being a good neighbour. Many people who worship in our churches make a real effort to be good neighbours, sometimes finding that this can be difficult. Christmas can be a time when those who are isolated can feel even more alone than usual. We had interesting discussions at both PCCs in September about being good neighbours. It was even suggested inviting someone who you know to be at home alone on Christmas Day to come and share Christmas. If they did not want to come, then an offer could be made to cook them Christmas Dinner and then take it round. These actions really would make a difference to the lives of some people on Christmas Day and would demonstrate practically that for Christians it is still the season of goodwill.

We had our discussions as part of our thinking about Hope 2008. This is a national initiative that all of our churches have agreed is something in which we need to participate. The idea is really very simple. The reality of those living by Christian values and attempting to show the love of God in their everyday lives should be good news to their local community. They should be bringers of hope. We want to make this hope more obvious, to make it more relevant. The local inspiration has been the wonderful group of women from the Elim Church who give up every Saturday morning to clean up the bus shelter. Instead of moaning and grumbling about those who make it a mess, they roll up their sleeves and clean it. Practical action making life better for us all. I know that since they have been seen to be doing it, the bus shelter has generally not been made so untidy. If you have any ideas on how local Christians can undertake action in the villages to show all that God has done, please be in touch with any of the local church leaders across the denominations. But do not just leave it to others. Look how you can be involved and bring hope to our communities in 2008. The service on New Year's Eve will be dedicated to this initiative.

Christmas should not feel like a burden place 'upon us', but the greatest of gifts given to us. Who can you show the significance of that gift to this Christmas?

Yours in Christ, *Patrick*