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Dear friends,

In October locally you could visit Father Christmas. Of course you could only see him at weekends, though I understand in Harrods he has been around since September. I have also seen a sign which said, 'Get your Christmas here'. This was outside a large retailer that was specialising in selling all kinds of Christmas goodies, from black Christmas trees to fluffy moving penguins. 'Get your Christmas here'. All the things you needed for Christmas were available under one roof. All of the different consumables rolled in together; Christmas was simply a commodity and this was the place in which to buy it.

It is not surprising that many people dread the season. Our airports will be full of people taking the easier option and simply abandoning the whole thing. Though, of course, all they are doing in buying into the idea of the Christmas holiday away and experiencing all the paraphernalia in a different place. I recall hearing about the delights of turkey and Christmas Pudding on a tropical beach. A friend of mine forbids everyone to send her Christmas cards and presents. Though a Parochial Church Council member and Sunday School teacher in her own church, she simply cannot stand what has happened to Christmas. I think she wishes she were a bear and could hibernate through it all! The trouble is, her hibernation would need to begin earlier and earlier. But at least she has the compensation that she could wake up on December 27th, or maybe even Boxing Day. After all, Christmas may arrive very early, but it is soon over in our contemporary culture. I am sure you have heard people say, "All this fuss for just one day".

It is a sad fact that in our modern world everything has become a commodity. We need to buy Christmas. It will be a better Christmas if we buy new things to decorate our houses. A local display of figures you can buy has an angel standing next to a snowman and a shepherd by a reindeer! The penguins just help with the winter atmosphere, along with the polar bear. All this is inevitable when we have forgotten what Christmas is really all about.

The antidote to all of this is not to run away from it, but to see it for what it is, and to come and celebrate the true meaning of Christmas. With services at 3, 4.30, 6 and 11.30 p.m. on Christmas Eve and 8, 9.45 and 11.15 a.m. on Christmas Day across our two churches, everyone has the opportunity to experience again the real meaning of Christmas. How sad it is when people say this is just a story for children. It is the most remarkable account of God, in the form of his son, being born amongst his people. It is often said all religions are the same. They might be the same in their desire to understand the relationship between humanity and the creator, but they are not the same in how this is expressed. They ask the same questions, but give different answers. The Christian understanding is anything but a story just for children. It may have become an excuse to give the latest gadget and to be sucked into consumerism, but it is the most extra-ordinary description of God understanding human life in all its frailty and complexity by being born amongst animals into a world of violence and injustice. Some years ago we had a large banner across the tower at Ingatestone. Perhaps we should have another during December; 'Get your Christmas here'. It would be a far more appropriate place to display the sentiment.

As you get caught up in all the busyness of December, remember that it is the season of Advent, a season of preparation for the extra-ordinary event of Christmas. This year, to give us the opportunity of peace and quiet we will be holding Compline services on Wednesdays 6th, 13th and 20th in St. Edmund and St. Mary Parish Church at 9 p.m. This service is used in monastic institutions to mark the end of the day. It is a service of quiet reflection. Silence will play an important part in these services. It may appear a strange time to come to church. Most Christians say prayer at the end of the day, giving thanks for all that has happened and reflecting upon the experiences. This service gives us a structure for doing that and the church will give us an appropriate place. Do consider joining with others.

Yours in Christ, Patrick