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Dear friends,

Christmas and the New Year are always time for traditions. We often know from one Christmas to the next the activities that we are going to undertake. Families will have their own special ways of celebrating a time that for young children is associated with mystery and wonder. Stories are constructed around the expected arrival of Father Christmas. It is all very innocent. Hopefully the family traditions include a visit to Church. "We always go to the Crib service...the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols...the Midnight Communion...the Christmas Morning Communion". And rightly so. How can we possibly celebrate Christmas without understanding the reason that it is celebrated? Christmas without Christ simply becomes an empty season of self-indulgence, imminent credit card statements and excuses to drink more than we should. Many people would like to recapture the innocence of those childhood Christmases. But someone, some way, that innocence has gone. It has faded like last year's tinsel.

The New Year is also a time when we look to recapture innocence. Why else do we make New Year's resolutions? As a response to our festive over-indulgence we promise ourselves restraint, "I won't do...I will spend less on...I must visit more often..." All good intentions, but we know ourselves and we know that in reality it will be but a short space of time in the New Year that we will have broken them. The New Year will be like the old year and we will soon be back to the regular business in January. Another Christmas and New Year gone.

Would it not be a real change if this year Christmas became something more than simply pleasant and familiar traditions and patterns of behaviour? That it was a genuine new beginning? A genuine experience of the true innocence that is at the very heart of the celebrations held at this time of year? For there can be nothing more innocent than the birth of a baby. I am delighted to undertake so many baptisms. Often the baby is at least six

months old. In October I undertook the baptism of George Thomas Knight, barely three months old. This small baby smiled at me as I laid my hand on him to bless him. He seemed so small, so precious, so innocent. Everyone at the service acknowledged that he was a precious gift to his parents. The same is true of any baby. The same was true of the baby born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. But so much more was true of this baby. His parents knew this to be so. The shepherds and wise men knew this as well. For all parents a baby is a miracle. The baby at Bethlehem was a miracle for all humanity. For that baby was not just a gift from God to his parents. He was a gift from God to us all. For that baby was to grow and provide for everyone an understanding for the reason and purpose for our lives. What better gift could there be than that for everyone?

Jesus himself said that to follow him we need to become as little children. This does not mean that we should suspend our sense of reason. It means that we should recapture that sense of innocence in relation to the world and to life that we see in a small child. That gleam of excitement that we see in the eye on Christmas morning. Everyone of us in some way has been battered and bruised by life. Some of you will look back on 2004 and say "good riddance". This is understandable, but regrettable. For our life is the greatest gift of all that we receive from God. The birth of the baby at Bethlehem for each of us gives the potential for our life to be lived in the most fulfilling way possible. For we will see the things that matter and are important in life, and see those that are illusory and are only apparently important.

My prayer for everyone this Christmas and New Year season is that we can all recapture in our lives that sense of innocence and wonder that was once there within us. For it can be re-ignited. Like the fireworks that will be part of our New Years Eve celebrations, following on the Churches Together service, our life can be lit and then explode into unimaginable colour. "Oh I wish this were true Patrick!" you may say. It is true! It is God's gift available to us, through the baby born at Bethlehem. Have a memorable Christmas and a joyous New Year.

Patrick.

