



Shaping our lives for Community this Christmas

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It was reported a few years back that a British man was so fond of Christmas that he celebrates it everyday of the year. Andy Park a 45 year old electrician has spent £250,000 celebrating Christmas daily in the last 12 years. The divorced father of one, starts his day with breakfast of six mince pies, and a turkey sandwich before going to work. He finishes work by 11.30am in order to start roasting the turkey. At 2pm he eats lunch, then he pulls crackers, about 40 a day, on his own. He watches a recording of the Queen's recorded Christmas message, a glass of sherry in hand. He reckons he has consumed over 100,000 brussel sprouts, over 4,000 turkeys, 87,000 mince pies, 4,300 bottles of champagne and has given over 21,000 presents to himself. – "I never get bored with it. I absolutely love Christmas," he says.

While the images of Andy solo at home getting into the Christmas tucker each day is a little unsettling, I take my hat off to Andy who tries to maintain a festive joy and anticipation about each day, albeit isolated from the community he lives with. Yet Andy's experience is like that of many folk who do not have family or community with them in this season of joy.

As we draw closer to celebrating the birth of the Christ-child, we remind ourselves of our fundamental need for community. We are made to connect with others, to contribute our gifts and

concerns to the welfare of all. This will be especially important as we seek to welcome Syrian refugees coming to our region. Will there be space in our hearts for them?

It was another special birth of a child in Africa some years ago that showed community is the cradle for our wellbeing. The storyteller wrote that on "One blistering hot day in Africa, I was driving a Peugeot flat bed truck along the 22 miles of rocky track between my mission station and the main road. As I skidded round a bend I almost ran into a body on the track. Lying on her back in the blazing sun was a woman trying to give birth but already exhausted and nearly dead. I took her to the Catholic sisters, 67 miles to the hospital. At every bump I winced and the woman moaned. In less than an hour after arriving at the hospital, the mother delivered her baby. She was very happy and held the baby across her chest. As soon as I went into the room, she began to thank me and say that I had saved her life and given life to the baby. She owed the baby's life to me. The baby belonged to me. The baby was mine. Before I could do anything she held the baby out to me, "Its life belongs to you; it's yours," she said. I was deeply, deeply moved and understood her words. I said a silent prayer that I would not do something stupid. I had no idea what to do.

"Then I heard myself saying, "Thank you so much for this precious gift. I accept

responsibility for the life of this child. I will always treasure this baby's life. But the child needs a mother. Will you be mother and look after this baby?" As if it were the most obvious thing in the world, she said, "Of course I will be the mother!" and I handed the baby back to the mother." (Adapted Anthony J. Gittens)

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans 1970.

True community does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too) but rather on two accounts: all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living centre, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another. The second (event) has its source in the first but is not immediately given with it. A living reciprocal relationship includes feelings but is not derived from them. A community is built upon a living, reciprocal relationship, but the builder is the living, active centre.

Just as this African child in a small way brought a profound connection between people of different cultures, languages, and backgrounds, so the "child in the manger", the living active centre, reminds us that the gift of community begins in the heart of God and seeks to make its home beyond kin, religion and ethnicity through the hearts and actions of people here



on earth. The incarnation is not only about God coming in human form but God building a community for all people.

The child in a manger reminds us that the troubled moments in our day do not need to swallow up our lives, rather God chooses to be born into them, and awakens us to live with the possibilities of love and redemption. In a world which must face such global realities as climate change, terror, poverty and homelessness, the angel's message of joy in the birth of Christ (*Luke 2*) has transformed how we regard all other humans - and what important responsibilities we have for nurturing a common vision for all human life and of creation.

Listen to this reflection for Christmas from my friend in Scotland, "Is it not strange to believe in a spring-time of the spirit in such uncertain times? To believe that within the possibilities of God goodness can be liberated and our weary hearts restored? Are we foolish to think that the wounded can be healed and that those in the shadows are blessed? Do we stand alone when we assert that meaningless is never the last word, or that a single life can sow God's seeds for the morrow? Yet even in our questioning the Word becomes real - for against all the odds Christ's hope remains earthed in our shared and global fragility. Gathered or scattered, we are not abandoned to our hesitations, but invited to that spring-time of the spirit bedded deep in our

souls and seen in our faces.

"For the road is marked by a Love that is stronger than hate, and the songs of life often spring from our suffering."
Peter Millar, Edinburgh.

May love be cherished in the joy of Christmas among family and friends, and may our hearts be open to our neighbours in whatever culture or circumstances we find them.

+Gregory