

Saint Jean de la Ruelle - English service 4<sup>th</sup> December 2016

It's very good to be with you this afternoon.

Christmas time is a great time of the year to be with the family and have lots of fun!

We love to play games together.

I wondered whether you would play a game with me this afternoon?

As I tell the Christmas story, I'd like you if you could put some feeling into it.

This group - every time you hear the word sheep - can you say "baa-baa"

This group - every time you hear the word shepherd - can you go "atchoo" because its cold

This group - every time you hear the word stable can you say "ahh" because it's so warm

This group - every time I say star can you say - "wow" because it's so wonderful.

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At Christmas time we love to tell the story of the Shepherds "atchoo" who were out in the fields tending their sheep "baa-baa". It's not surprising that the shepherds "atchoo" had built a big fire because they were very cold. Talking long into the night they told stories from long ago and even began to hum some of the songs written by David the shepherd boy "atchoo"

As they lay by the fire, they looked up into the night sky and were surprised to see a particularly bright star "wow" it seemed to fill the field with light and they had no trouble counting their sheep "baa-baa" to make sure they were safe. Even the town of Bethlehem seemed bathed by the light of this star "wow" . Everything seemed so quiet and peaceful, all the town was asleep except for a light coming from one small stable "ahh" which seemed to have a candle flickering at the window.

Suddenly like a flash of lightening the sky was ablaze and the rolling music of a myriad voices filled their mind. "Peace on earth good will to all men". An angel more dazzling than the star "wow" spoke to them and said - go to the stable "ahh" and find that a newborn baby has been born, he is wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. He is born today a savior to the world.

Leaving their sheep "baa-baa" the shepherds "atchoo" ran towards the stable "ahh" and entered it, the star "wow" shining through the cracks in the roof. There in that stable "ahh" they found a mother and child lying in the straw just as the angel had told them whilst they were tending their sheep "baa-baa"

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That's part of the story of Christmas that we like to tell. You can give yourselves a round of applause for so much feeling into it.

Christmas is a great time of feeling and emotion. We don't always get it quite right. For example when we tell the Christmas story it always sounds very romantic. But how would you feel giving birth to your first child, far from home and in less than ideal circumstances. Recently I spoke to a mother who had given birth to her child in the car before her husband had got the car out of the garage. Then there is all the political turmoil in the story of people moving about because of a census. There are soldiers on the streets and a growing movement of people praying for a Messiah.

I think the feelings and emotions of that first Christmas were very different from what you will find on the average Christmas card.

Christmas is a time when feelings and emotions get fairly mixed up and we find it hard to unravel and express what is going on inside. For little children it is often just lots and lots of excitement that bubbles over all day long. But for other people Christmas can be a time of sadness, a time to remember people who are no longer with us, or a difficult time when we have to face up to some of the hard economic facts that we can't afford everything that we want to buy for our family and friends.

But let's not forget the fun of Christmas where we can express our feelings of love and gratitude to someone and sometimes

the thought given to choosing the gift is even more important than the gift itself. Because we want to say in just a special way, that we love, how much they mean to us.

When we tell the Christmas story it is important to think about our thoughts and feelings as we relate to the people in the story. But what is even more important to think about (the real reason that we tell the story), is to find out how God thinks and feels about us.

We can't see God, but we believe he is everywhere. We often use the illustration of the wind in the trees you can't see it, but you can feel and observe where the wind blows.

Being part of God's creation allows us to wonder who or what is behind all that we experience and enjoy. Can we know him or her and can we speak in these personal terms about God in any meaningful way?

It's at Christmas that everything come into focus. If I stay silent and don't speak to you, then you can't possibly know what I am thinking. So it is only possible for us to know about God's thoughts and feelings if he tells us and expresses them to us.

Christmas is like two young people who finally find the courage to say "I love you". For Christians this is the focal point of history. This is what it's all about. God comes to us in our language, at the level of our humanity. He tells us how precious life is and how fragile it can be and how that matters to God.

As we get to know Jesus as the full expression of who God is. We find out how kind and generous he is; how patient and good and fair he is. In fact as we get to know him, we can feel a little awkward sometimes because in contrast we realise how short tempered and selfish we have become.

But God speaks to us in Jesus, not to tell us just how bad we are; but to tell us how much he loves and cares for us.

God is a loving father, a caring dad!

He's not prepared to let things go from bad to worse, he gets involved with our problems and is willing to sort them out. If you

think about how a sponge absorbs all the mess on the table and cleans it up, you can see what God does when he comes to us in Jesus Christ. He takes our sin and gives us a clean start.

So this Christmas it's right to think about our feelings; there might be sadness and hurt, there might be wonderful joy and anticipation. But perhaps the most important thing to think about how God feels about you and why he expressed his love through the best gift of all - a friend who will never leave us nor forsake us.

My prayer, is that the joy of this Christmas message might help you to start again and let the love of God fill your life.

John Wilson