

The Essence of Christmas. The Reverend Ruth Hulse

I did an assembly a few years ago about 'the essence of Christmas'. I'd found a candle (that still burns in our house this Christmas) that is called, 'The Essence of Christmas'. It's smell is supposed to conjure up all the images of things that 'make' Christmas. I asked the children to smell the candle and think about what could be described as the essence of Christmas. We looked together at tinsel, brussel sprouts, Christmas carols, cards and other such things and I asked them whether these were the essence of Christmas for them. And then I went through each of the items, took them away, and challenged them to think about whether we could still celebrate Christmas if these things were not part of it, not present that year. Of course we could!

Maybe it's more about the presence? No, I didn't say "presents" as in the gifts you find under the tree. I said "presence" as in being there. And many people would say that it *is* family or friends that make Christmas, being with people we love, despite the arguments that so many people seem to have when they *do* come together for Christmas!

When you think about Christmases you've enjoyed, I would guess, more than the food or drink or gifts, you remember the people who were around. You may have memories of Christmases in the past with loved ones who you have lost, or people who are still by your side, children – with you still, or those who have grown up and left home, or grandchildren bringing with them excitement and joy. Some of these memories will be bitter sweet, but they are all about presence.

This year, of course, is a bit different, and we might have to rediscover the essence of Christmas in a different way, through a very different Christmas indeed. So what is the essence of Christmas if the very thing that makes it Christmas for so many, spending time with loved ones, *will* be taken away this year? What is left when that is taken away?

Well, I would argue that presence is still left.

Presence is about much more than just being in the same place as another person. Being present is giving something of ourselves, listening, sharing, understanding. Presence is about being connected. It's about growing relationships and it's about love.

And that really *is* the essence of Christmas; the Christmas story we recall in the carols and readings we hear at this time of year is one of presence and love. Christmas is about God present on earth. God connecting with us and building relationship with us. God giving us the opportunity to connect with Him as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God asking us to connect with one another out of love, because He first loved us. Presence.

Through God's gift of His Son to us – this child born more than 2000 years ago, who grew up in an ordinary family, had friends, lost friends, knew pain and knew laughter - through Jesus' birth, we have an opportunity for a relationship built on presence with the Word who became flesh. God who listens, shares, understands and loves us. Because He is Emmanuel, God with us.

My prayer for all of us this Christmas is that even though we may not be able to be physically present with those whom we love, we can think about being present to each other in other ways, we can be present to ourselves, and we can take the time to be present to God, knowing that he is present with us.

Let us pray:

Loving father, who sent your son Jesus Christ to live among us and to be present as one of us, we bring before you the relationships that mean so much to us and that we are missing so much at this time. Teach us to find new ways to be present to each other this Christmas and always, in that presence, to find you present beside us.

Amen.