

Hate or love it; treasure it

Just passing Cadbury Garden Centre, I thought I would call in to check out a new shrub for the garden I was looking for. It was the second Saturday in November and I thought I would be safe. A big mistake! Santa had just arrived and there was not a car parking space in sight. I turned tail and left. Suddenly I felt overwhelmed by everything I dislike about this time of year: the crowds and the commercialism. Am I alone in finding it all just too much? The endless TV adverts for things I do not want and every shop bombarding me with Christmas musac. It all seems so far from the real spirit of Christmas.

Lest you think I am a miserable Christmas Grinch, I do love the first time I go down the High Street after the Christmas lights have been turned on. Portishead High Street has real style with its simple but beautiful lights and they do make me feel that Christmas is coming.

But my most special moment each Christmas comes after Midnight Mass. The carols have been sung and the crowds have gone happily on their way after much hand shaking and festive greetings; the church once again falls silent. After all the fun of the Crib and Toy services and the gentle splendour of Midnight Mass, there is a chance to be still. The crib is there, seeming to emanate light. It draws me to it and I stand and stare. Mary, Joseph and the baby in the manger, with ox and ass looking on and shepherds newly arrived.

Here is what it is really all about. All the decorations, the piles of presents under the tree and fridges groaning under the weight of food. The world's biggest party is all for this. The danger is that preparing for the party nearly finishes us off and we become so distracted we forget what it is all about. Yet for those willing to stop and pause amidst the celebrations, the greatest gift the world has ever known is waiting to be unwrapped.

Standing alone at the crib in the stillness of the church, I try to understand. This is my God come to earth. He who is almighty comes as a helpless babe. An offering of love, made in human form. No matter how long I stand there, I know I will never fully understand all this baby represents but here in this stable scene I know is the really meaning of this season.

May all your Christmas preparations go well and may you find time for Christ this Christmas. May its wonder captivate you anew and shape your celebrations and may the love of the Christ child warm your heart this Christmas and always.

Andy.