

## **Hinde Street Methodist Church**

**13 December 2020**

**Rev Peter Cornick and Deacon Belinda Letby**

**Social distance: God with us**

Carol services evoke memories. I remember as a child, a packed church with stewards putting out extra seats in the aisle; getting stuck in the snow driving to a village carol service near Salisbury; playing carols in a band at a visitor attraction – in a cattle-shed with real animals. It's true!

So much about the carol service or singing carols in public, is about people gathering together; enjoying singing or playing: O Come, O Come Emmanuel; glad tidings of great joy I bring; Hail, the heaven born Prince of Peace!

This year; so different. We are not together – our choir is virtual – there is no warm mince pie to share with friends afterwards. How we would love to pull on the scarf and hat to go to church. In the interests of public health, we are socially distant. Even if we were in church, only six people could sing. Carol services were not designed for social distance. Yet, this one will evoke strange memories for years to come.

This year, we have been unable to be with people. Visiting our family or friends has been off limits – the fear of passing on the virus to older members; restrictions which have limited travel to different parts of the country. Greeting people has been distant – no handshakes or hugs – shouting through closed windows to residents of care homes; sociologists now wonder whether children growing up will become frightened of closer contact from granny – when it is allowed. We have discovered this year that what we took for granted, human contact, closeness, is an essential part of our makeup.

We have been a people walking in darkness.

There is then, a certain irony, in that the central message of any carol service must be, God has come close to us, in the birth of a child. The longing of the prophets was for God to come amongst us and save us.

The Psalmist, in despair cries:

*Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?*

*Rise up, come to our help.*

*Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. (Psalm 44: 23-26)*

Come and be with us – come here God – see what it's like to live as a human being.

This year, we have glimpsed what it's like for many people to live on a daily basis – uncontrolled disease; premature mortality; economic hardship. The benefits of the vaccination you will receive next year should not dull your memory of what Covid has shown you – a gross inequality around the world and within this country.

Into such a world, God comes close to us – born a child. God comes to visit; to touch our humanity – 'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!'

We are living a socially distant life; separate; apart. The message of Christmas is the very opposite.

*'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',  
which means, 'God is with us.'*