

From the Vicarage Window

Sometimes it's hard to believe that time doesn't accelerate as the year goes on. Christmas, the New Year and the Epiphany are already almost upon us before we've really had time to prepare ourselves.

Of course, there's a whole industry out there devoted to telling us how to celebrate "the perfect Christmas." We've all read glossy magazine articles telling us how to achieve this elusive goal and they seem - to me at least - often to strain the boundaries of realism (and available time and energy) to breaking point.

One of the facts of human life is that things are rarely if ever 'perfect.' And if we try too hard to achieve perfection, then we are almost certainly doomed to disappointment even before we begin. Perhaps we should put unrealistic expectations, fuelled by a heady and almost irresistible mixture of commercial pressures and childhood nostalgia, on one side and resolve to celebrate a 'happy' Christmas rather than a 'perfect' one

What we mean when we talk of the true 'spirit of Christmas,' isn't managing to buy the most individual presents, producing the ideal Christmas lunch, or organising the best ever New Year party, but fostering a spirit of hospitality, kindness and genuine concern towards one another at what can be, paradoxically, one of the most pressured and anxious times of the year. Perfection – if it exists in this regard – can take care of itself: life is too short.

There's a phrase from one of the less well-known Christmas carols, '*It came Upon the Midnight Clear,*' which speaks of "the ever-circling years" – in other words, we are helped and blessed by the fact that these things come around on an annual basis, and that we are, in fact, given the opportunity to prepare and time to reflect, as the years go by, upon the more profound meaning of the festivities and celebrations in which we take part. The angels' message to the shepherds in the fields on that first Christmas night was one of peace and goodwill because of the love, mercy and compassion of our God who became one of us in the Bethlehem stable.

The 'perfect Christmas,' if it exists, is trying to put the values which stem from that message centre stage in our lives.

Have a very happy Christmas!

Fr Michael