

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

70 years ago, an obscure Professor of Literature from the USA published a book. In 2011, Time Magazine included it in its list of the 100 best and most influential books written in English.

I wonder if you've even heard of it? The author was called Joseph Campbell and the book was the fruit of his research amongst tribal communities from all over the world whose folk stories, myths and legends he sat and listened to.

What he found, to his amazement, was that the vast majority of them boil down to the same essential plot. To sum it up in five words; how will our hero ever get home against all odds? His book is called, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces."

Many bestsellers and blockbuster films since the publication of that book have deliberately picked up this theme. Here are just a few that you will have heard of; E.T., Star Wars, Harry Potter, The Lion King, The Lord of the Rings, Apollo 13, Toy Story, Indiana Jones, and many more... They are all about the same thing; how do you get home?

These stories endure because they all awaken a profound yearning we all have deep down – we want to be home. There's no place like home. Home is where the heart is. And when you're somewhere strange you feel happier when someone says, "Make yourself at home."

There is a visceral need, felt universally amongst human beings, to find our way back to *the* refuge of security, of familiarity, the place where we know we're loved and accepted. Where everyone is for you. Home sweet home.

Home, of course, is not a happy place for everyone. The word "home" for some people tragically stirs up emotions of anger and anxiety. If you know anyone who grew up in a home dominated by abuse or neglect or

constant fighting, you are painfully aware that home is not always what we know deep down it can be and should be.

Janet Taylor, who used to be a member of this church, volunteers for the Samaritans. She will tell you that Christmas is the time of year that they get the most calls. Why is that?

Maybe it's that, for many, the perfect Christmas home displayed in heart-warming adverts is just so far from reality that it just magnifies their sense of loneliness and unhappiness.

Our carols are one of the greatest treasures of the church and I love them. But I freely admit they can romanticise the first Christmas a bit. We sing of the "dreamy little town of Bethlehem", of a baby that "no crying he makes", and of a young mother "in her maiden bliss."

The first Christmas is actually about:

- a couple with a strained relationship
- stressed and far from home
- struggling in vain to find temporary accommodation
- eventually having to settle for something totally unsuitable
- sudden contractions and harrowing labour
- no midwife or medical care on hand
- their privacy thereafter constantly interrupted by uninvited guests

And all because some bureaucrat in Rome decided it would be a good idea to arrange a census for a new poll tax. How thoughtful of him...

We sang a little earlier a lesser known carol which does portray the first Christmas a bit more realistically.

*Born in the night, Mary's Child, a long way from Your home;
Coming in need, Mary's Child, born in a borrowed room.*

Joseph and Mary *were* a long way from home (the trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 100 miles). That's a long distance by foot, especially when you are nine-months pregnant.

But Jesus travelled much further than 100 miles. "He came down to earth from heaven," we sing.

He left the dazzling glory of the heavenly realm and the majesty of his eternal throne to make his home among us, as one of us. For the one who brought galaxies into being, "tears and smiles like us he knew."

But is that all Christmas is? Is it just a vague message to warm the heart – God coming to earth as one of us to affirm the dignity of human existence? It's actually much more than that.

So, what is Christmas? Is it about God loving us so much that he really lowers and demeans himself to show it? It's really much more than that too.

Christmas is good news because the world isn't how it was meant to be. It's gone wrong; some of us may not even know it, but we are all spiritually far from home. It's why our lives sometimes feel incomplete, our relationships come under strain and stress; it's why God often seems far away.

The message of Christmas is that Jesus has come in flesh and blood not just to experience our world but to fix it.

Listen to what the angel said the night Jesus was born: "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for *all people*. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you."

In other words; this child when he grows up will make it possible for every person on this spinning planet to have a home in a relationship with God the Father. Heaven's door is open so even the least deserving can come home to God.

Many people make Christianity so complicated, but Jesus always made things very simple. He spoke to people using everyday words, framing his exhilarating message in unforgettable, simple stories.

One of the most memorable stories he told was of a young, impulsive son who walks out on his family, and makes for the big city to have a wild old time.

But all the time he's partying hard and throwing his money on sex, drugs and rock and roll, as he runs up huge debts, he cannot ignore this sickening feeling he has that no amount of pleasure is addressing the growing ache of emptiness and loneliness he feels inside. Before long, he's lost his house, got fired from his job and watched his friends disappear one by one.

"Then" says Jesus, "he came to his senses." I picture him waking up in a ditch, penniless and hung over, wondering what happened to his trousers. He's at rock bottom.

"What am I *doing* here?" Then, he finally admits it. "This is not working for me." This is when it hits him. "Home was so much better than this. I was valued and felt rooted at home. I was secure. I was listened to. I was loved. Maybe I could find my way... home."

And so he becomes one of the heroes with 1,000 faces. You know the story; he makes for home, his father meets him, throws his arms round him, makes a fuss of him and celebrates his return with a great party.

Does anyone here want to come home to the Father right here, right now? Is life working for you? Is it fulfilling the inner needs and deepest desires you have in your soul? If not, is it time for you - today - to come home where God is waiting, to receive you, just as you are?

May the love of Christ and the joy of the herald angels fill your home this Christmas - and always.