

Molesworth described Christmas in *How to be Topp*:

“Christmas day always start badly becous Molesworth 2 blub he have not got the real Rolls Royce he asked for. We then have argument that each have more presents than the other. Then comes DINNER. This is super. Christmas is a good time with all those presents and good food and I hope it will never die out or at any rate not until I am grown up and hav to pay for it all.’

Each family has their own familiar Christmas morning, a unique blend of the cosy – warm fire, twinkling lights, Christmas stockings, cooking smells – and the inevitable arguments or stresses that arise with family gathered together in a state of high expectation.

So we come to church, for there surely on this most special of days, we will get a real boost to our quota of cosiness. No nasty surprises for we know the story already.

But one word in the gospel jars. Syria! There is it, it even turns up in the Christmas gospel! Quirinius was appointed legate of Syria by Augustus, and part of his role was to see how much tax could reasonably be gained from Judea. The census! The reason why Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem. But it was of greater significance than that. The taking of a census was banned under Jewish law, and this action led to revolt and to the formation of the zealots.

One superpower imposing its will on another nation creates conflict. It has always been so! There were ambushes, killings, reprisals – it was a bloody time. At least in those days though there were no guns, no bombs.

It was into this political tinderbox that Jesus came - a defenceless baby, totally dependent upon those around it for survival. This was the hope for the world. The Saviour of the world. Emmanuel, God with us.

Those that cared for the baby Jesus had to change. Mary had to learn to be strong, strong enough to deal with the gossip, strong enough to care for her newborn without her mother being there or clean surroundings, strong enough to become a refugee and flee to Egypt, strong enough to love - whatever was going on around her. Joseph also had to learn to be strong, strong enough to trust Mary, strong enough to listen, strong enough to admit he could be wrong, strong enough to love - whatever was going on around him.

When that baby grew up this was the lessons his disciples had to learn. Could they be strong enough to forgive, strong enough to resist violence, strong enough to trust in God, strong enough to love not just the good, but the bad and the ugly too?

Jesus was born to teach us about love, about what love really looks like, what it really feels like.

Is it like being wrapped in a warm soft blanket on a cold day, a mince pie and a glass of mulled wine by your side? It can be. But it is also waiting in the freezing cold to collect your child after a party. It is getting up early to serve breakfast at the night shelter. It is calming down a drunk teenager who swears at you for trying to help. It is reaching out to help a refugee. It is praying for peace in Syria. It is the breaking of your heart when the person you love dies. You have to be strong to love.

Jesus came to bring us the strength to love. To show us what it can be like. To show us how much we are loved by God. And although we live two thousand years after that birth, we have not missed the boat. We can receive this strength that comes from his love in the bread and the wine. It is the offering of Christ himself, his sacrifice for us. We can receive it in his blessing.

And when we receive, our eyes are opened, for to receive Christ, is to receive all the risk and vulnerability of love and loving. It can make us feel as dependent as a new baby, as anxious as a new mother, for once you know love, you realise what it would mean to lose that love.

But it also makes us strong, for love enables us to give and to forgive, love makes us courageous and generous, able to work for justice and peace and brave enough to speak out against all that is wrong with our world.

So at the communion, receive the bread and wine, receive this wonderful gift of love, and bring to Christ your fragility, your worries about the future, the sorrows and joys of this past year, and know yourself to be loved and to be loving.

And then, as we go about our daily lives, and the warm glow of Christmas begins to fade, and we see once more the all the problems that beset the world, we can remember this strength of love and its ability to create change.

For with love, all things are possible and we too can play our part in bringing hope to the hopeless and love to the unloved. And we will know that what we sense here today, this sense of specialness that is Christmas, is available to us at all times. We can receive that gift of love in bread and wine all year round, and share it with all we meet by small acts of kindness and generosity, if we dare risk the vulnerability of love.

May you have a Very Happy Christmas.