Christmas is one of the certainties of the year. Just like the self-assessment deadline, and GCSE results, we know when it is going to happen. And we spend days and more usually weeks getting ready for it.

Christmas means different things to different people. For some it means a chance to family together, and renew the bonds of love and care which bind us together. For others it means getting into debt. For some of us it may be a time to let our hair down, eat and drink more than is probably good for us, and end up with a vague sense of regret the morning after.

My friends of other faiths talk about how much they look forward to Christmas, seeing it as a time for celebration, for family, for giving thanks, a festival of light in the middle of a dark time of the year. I know Hindus who go to Midnight Mass;

important it is for them to
An element of this getting ready is to look at ourselves, and acknowledge what we need in order to flourish. We know the basics of what we need: food, shelter, warmth, affection, security. But we also need a sense of who we are and why we matter. A sense that our lives are purposeful.

We can’t flourish as human beings without a sense of who we are and why we matter. We are tiny specs of life living out a span of about 80 years if we’re lucky on a small and beautiful blue-green planet spinning in the vast expanse of space, existing for the mere blink of a nanosecond in the great span of eternity. Anyone who has had the experience of gazing up at the star-filled night sky in a place where there is no light pollution will have had glimpse of our smallness. So how can we make sense of our life? How can we find our place in all of this vastness and seeming indifference?

What the feast of Christmas is about, and what this season of Advent prepares us for, is the sense that there is a meaning to our lives. That individually we are not insignificant, but highly significant and meaning-full. That our lives have a purpose and a value.
People understand *their* purpose in all kinds of ways. For some it is focussed on achievement, how many degrees they can earn, how high they can rise in their chosen profession, how well, effectively, they can do their job, provide for their family, how secure and happy can they make their relationships.

Some people discover their purpose differently, and it may be founded on a sense of vocation – to bring about world peace; to solve the Middle East dilemmas; to enter politics and work for a better society; to get involved at local level in building community, to focus our energy on helping other people; to care passionately and practically for our planet; to leave the world a better place than we found it, by acts of courage or service. They are people whose lives will make a difference. These people don’t necessarily have a religious faith, although a surprising number do. But they are people who have discovered a purpose which lies outside of themselves.

However, it’s easy to feel *both* purposeless *and* valueless. We can drift, in our routines from day to day, just getting on with what is in front of us and getting through it and surviving another day to fall into bed and start again the next day. Deadlines, pressure, meeting other peoples’ expectations, lack of time, or too much time on our hands, loneliness, physical and mental illness – these can all lead us to lose our sense of *meaning* or never to find it.

Our age is one in which we experience, full-on multiple assault from all sides, on our senses, in the sheer volume of information on and offline that is available to us, in the way in which so many voices clamour for our attention. And then there are our internal uncertainties about who we are, whether we look right, whether people will like us or diss us, whether people approve of us or think we are rubbish, and deep down we’re wondering whether we are OK or not OK. Lack of self esteem is a big issue for many of us.
How do we come to value ourselves? Because until we do, we can’t truly flourish. Time at university is often a time spent beginning to discover what we value and what we don’t about ourselves. We may do this this by dipping in and out of stuff, by trying out ideas and attitudes and behaviours, and trying things on and seeing if they fit and make us feel more or less like who we sense ourselves to be.

At Christmas we receive something precious which helps us by laying out a foundational understanding of who we are. We receive it through a story, which we tell and retell each year amid the clatter and clamour of the festivities, the shopping, the tinsel, the din and the sales. It is a quiet story which takes place in a land far away, in a time long ago.

It’s a story with an unusual plot and cast of characters – a pregnant, unmarried young girl and the boyfriend who stuck by her, even though she was entirely vague about who the father was; a long and tiring journey late on in the pregnancy to obey the edict of a foreign occupying power to be numbered and counted like cattle; the desperate search for a room when the contractions started, and got closer together, a birth – messy, long and pain-filled, as birth usually is – in an animal shed, which at least was out of the wind; so far, so human.

But then the crashing in of some pretty rank smelling animal herders from the hills, for no apparent reason; but with stories of the skies filled with ethereal singing later. Later an astonishing visit from some foreign dignitaries who brought very odd presents; And then a despotic king, who for some reason had flown into a murderous and uncontrollable rage when the news of the birth reached him; a hasty gathering of possessions and flight across the border to relative safety as strangers in an unknown land; stories of supernatural messengers. And at the centre of all of this, a tiny vulnerable little scrap of a baby.

It’s a story with both human and supernatural elements. The human elements sound strangely modern.
All over the world, women are wondering if they could be pregnant, and what the implications are for themselves, their partners, the rest of their lives. Some are wondering who the father is, and whether to let the pregnancy continue.

Insecure housing is, sadly, an all too familiar feature of our society.

We can all list parts of the world where the regime is imposing its controlling weight, demands and often violence on ordinary people and making their lives unbearable. The desperate flight from home to another country is not news: we’re facing the highest ever level of displacement worldwide – nearly 71 million people.

What may find ourselves wondering, what is the purpose of each of these lives? The pregnant girls, the homeless people, those who have become refugees, migrants, asylum seekers; and each one of us? What can possibly give any of these lives meaning?

The Christmas story is a human story, but it is one into which heaven breaks, and we get an astonishing glimpse of power. The power which is behind, above and beyond everything that we can see, hear and touch.

It is an ultimate power, the power out of which everything came about. As St John’s gospel has told us this evening, *through him all things were made, and without him was not anything made that was made.* Christmas is when we focus on the power of God breaking into our world. And it is not a mechanical power, or a physical power, or a coercive power, but its name is Love – the most potent force of all – shown weirdly in the vulnerability of a tiny newborn in a highly dangerous situation.

From that Love comes the precious thing we receive from this story from long ago - the message that each one of us matters. That there is a purpose for each life. *Every life has a value.* The meaning lies in the place where the all too human narrative meets the heavenly one, the one which is outside of time and space, the story of God’s desire for what God has created, out of Love.
This story from long ago is such a powerful and compelling one that more than 2000 years later it is still told, every year, in words and music, in nativity plays and carol services, on radio and television, in our churches, and even on the streets.

That tiny baby, born in poverty in a Middle Eastern backwater, was the physical manifestation of God’s immense love, he grew up to be a local celebrity preacher and teacher, healer and exorcist, miracle worker and source of wisdom. Was put to death for being a blasphemer and a trouble maker. Rose to life again – inexplicably – and today 2.3 billion people follow his teaching. That teaching is about how much we matter to God. That God loves each one of us with a crazy, passionate, unreasonable and totally illogical love. It’s that love which gives meaning and purpose to life, to our life. Love, the power which caused all that is to come into being, came to dwell among us and in us, with us and for us. It’s the power of that love which bestows on each of us a value beyond measure.

That is the gift which is given to us afresh each Christmas season – the knowledge that, however we feel, however stressed we are, however badly stuff seems to be going, however disastrously our love life, or our social life, or our work, or the world around us seems to be going, we are ultimately loved and that we are ultimately OK.

It’s a huge stretch of human credulity to believe that God came to be among us, to be born and live as a human being; to be resurrected after death. It is, by any reckoning, almost unbelievable. It is a narrative which it takes courage to believe. But it is a narrative which refuses to die, and which has given and continues to give people such a sense of purpose and meaning that it is the enduring melody of the lives of one third of the people who currently live on this planet.

So this Advent and Christmas season, we are offered again the invitation to think afresh about the purpose and meaning of our lives, to value them and to wonder anew whether this story deserves another look.
Blessings on your ponderings, and however you engage with these questions, or decide not to, may you have a wonderful and joy-filled Christmas, when it comes.