

Christmas at the Vicarage.

The first time that I heard the Silent Night story.

A couple of years ago, it was the 50th anniversary for the Cranmer Group of Parishes; my father, Geoffrey Blackmore, was their first vicar and was responsible for establishing the Group in early 1966. This was a new experiment for the Diocese and a busy role; the vicar was at the centre of daily life, the phone or door-bell rang at all times of the day or night; routine was there but there always had to be room for the unforeseen, too - there must have been some impressive intuition and organisation behind it all! It's 38 years since he died but still we're stopped by people wanting to be remembered to us because of the impact he had on their lives.

And so, our Christmas Day; flurries of busy, flurries of chaos, flurries of fun, lots and lots of people and moments of calm. Dad had 6 parishes and the Whatton Detention Centre to look after and every Church saw him over Christmas: Christmas Eve – Carols & Lessons alternated with the Nativity Pageant in Orston (live animals, including the donkey attempting to upstage Mary as she sang the Magnificat); Midnight Mass in Whatton (Dad's sermon carefully timed to start just as the clock chimed at midnight, so that he could be the first to wish a crowded and rather merry congregation, 'Merry Christmas!'), somehow Father Christmas always knew not to come until after Midnight Mass ...; Communion at 8am and 9.30 on Christmas morning; ("You can open one present before Church – choose quickly!"); 10.30 Family Service in Aslockton (full to the brim & noisy!); quick coffee, all of us round the kitchen table, Dad allowed to drink from the saucer in the interests of speed (a guilty pleasure ...); 11.30 Detention Centre Service – he thrived on this helter skelter but phew ...

This was the point of the day where the three of us invaded his beautiful book-lined study, claiming a corner each for our Christmas presents and play began in earnest – we kept this haven for 2 or 3 days! The only service missing from his usual Sunday was Evensong (followed by 'catching up with the non-churchgoers' in the Cranmer Arms & pulling pints if needed whilst George Taylor changed a barrel!). But on Christmas Day, from lunchtime onwards; that was family and friends time – warm, cosy & invariably full of people (including one year, a family met at Midnight Mass who had just moved in and had no water or electricity – they came home with Dad, shared our Christmas and are still amongst the best of our friends). Ramshackle Victorian vicarages were a nightmare to maintain but brilliant for kids and brilliant at Christmas.

Anyway, at some point, I have no idea how old I was or even which Church we were in; I have a vivid memory of hearing the story of the Mouse and the Christmas carol, Silent Night.

It was winter dark outside; the lights inside were very low. It wasn't cosy but certainly it was still and slightly mysterious. There is a strangeness for a small child in a congregation watching her father like this; remote (although he certainly wasn't in real life).

My father had a compelling presence and a voice that immersed you; particularly when he was telling you a story. He had an eye that seemed only to be seeing you and talking to you. So, in a dark church that was full but silent this remote figure telling the simple story of the mouse, befriended by a priest and responsible for these words and this music is like a gentle

echo that keeps tapping me on the shoulder ...

It's a lot of years ago and the world is ever-changing but the simplicity of the Christmas message is worth holding tightly on to – be kind to everyone, whoever they are, and be kind to the world we live in.

Jane Fraser (Nov 2018).

PS. My Sister wrote our family's first, 'Christmas at the Vicarage' some years ago and she finished it with this message, which I still love:

"Our Christmas memories become our Christmas present and these will be the memories of our children and then for their children; may these continue to be the real spirit of Christmas and the Birth of Jesus."

