

Trying to say something nice about Christmas when it's only halfway through November (as I write) would be incongruous on its own - it didn't need coffee being spilled all over my desk as well. The latter event immediately replaced the priest with the old bootneck sergeant. Even more remote than was Christmas.

However, the ping of my mobile a few moments later brought a text with some kind words from my wife who'd stopped to think of me in the middle of her "girls' shopping trip" to Cambridge. (Greater love hath no woman, than she pauseth shopping to think of her husband.) Peace restored in the rectory as unexpectedly as it had disappeared.

It reminds me of a time when I was in a commando unit that spent a very sweaty May/June on exercise in swampy North Carolina. R&R was States-side; I took a road trip. Highway 17 has, mostly, not a lot on it. So I was somewhat fed up by the time I came across a remote clutch of shops, one of which, to my surprise, was an all-year Christmas store. Apparently they're not uncommon over there. (Yes, I know: there's one in Holt!)

Irresistably drawn in, I was immediately transported to the wonder and peace of the Christmas mind-set. So unexpected, and to be honest, overwhelming. Outside it was a sticky Carolinian June, inside it was constantly Christmas, and - even more surprisingly - not all tacky. The reminders of the gift of a child who is One in God, (indeed God With Us) were everywhere I looked and the cool air - albeit air-conditioned - full of carolling.

So, having bartered a price for three rather good Santa Clauses, but more importantly, having been refreshed by the reminder of God's presence in our world, I went on my way, restored.

The peace of The Lord can be with us so unexpectedly - like the Christ-child. It is the gift of God that can come to us at any time. Thank God. A few kind words, a selfless gesture, a moment of forgiveness, a piece of music, a vision of loveliness; you know the sort of thing. The love of God so generously given is a gift that we can all give.

Give generously, then, this Christmas - and remember: Christmas is not just for Christmas.