

The story is told of a church organist who played for his parish for over 50 years. He then retired and moved to another district: but the parishioners were determined that his years of faithful service should be suitably acknowledged. A parish party was arranged at which a handsome cheque would be presented to the ex-organist. A huge crowd filled the parish hall, thanks to many weeks of extremely hard work by the organizers. It was only at the last moment that the embarrassing truth dawned on them – in the busyness of their preparations they had forgotten to invite the principle guest himself.

I know I've told the story before but it's one that stays with me and which I inevitably recall at this time every year. It happened at the Waverley Gardens Shopping Centre a couple of years ago. For some time the Inter-church Council had assembled a large crib in the center of the mall a couple of weeks before Christmas. On this particular year they approached the Centre management just to confirm that they would do the same again, only to be told "Sorry. No. That is not our theme this year!"

There's a sense in which those stories are re-enacted every Christmastime. After months of hectic preparations for a grand celebration, many people seem to be unaware of the One in whose honour the celebration takes place: to all intents and purposes, he is not invited. The situation is highlighted in newsagencies and card shops that display a rack of "Christmas cards" and almost at the end a sub-section entitled "Religious Cards". The implication is that the latter group is intended for those extremists who want to drag religion into Christmas.

However, as our scripture makes clear, leaving Jesus out of Christmas is not simply a sad oversight. It's a tragedy. It means that we are bypassing God's extraordinary love for us, bypassing the dazzling destiny that awaits us.

Mary, always so alert to the ways of the Lord, is described as treasuring and pondering in her heart the wonder of Christ's birth and the events surrounding it. We are invited to follow her example – to spend a little time pondering on the real meaning of Christmas, trying to appreciate what it means that our God should have such immense love for us. It is that prayerful pondering on God's compassion and generosity that inspires many

people at Christmas time to try and offer their less fortunate sisters and brothers something of the divine love. And so, on Christmas day, bishops often visit people in prison, some Christians call upon the sick and the housebound, others look after the homeless poor, couples invite a lonely person into their home for a meal.

Christmas is, almost universally, a time of family celebration; and while such get-togethers can be gloriously happy occasions, a wonderful way to celebrate Christ's birth, it is no secret that they can be fraught occasions, too, giving rise to tensions and worse. According to a Latin hymn, where there is love and loving-kindness, there is God: the implication being that where such love is absent, so too God is absent. That is why we who appreciate the wonder of Christmas, will do all in our power during these days to promote love and friendship and good will, wherever we may be. We'll do it not just because it makes life more pleasant all round, but because it is a way of ensuring that Jesus will indeed be present in the midst of our Christmas, his birthday celebrations.