



Prayers for Christmas morning *By Karen Stallard, Union Chapel Minister*

Gracious God

Our hearts are full of joy when we spend time with loved ones,
as we eat and talk, laugh and listen

Our spirits are lifted as we receive gifts and greetings from those who take time to think of us.

We rejoice as we witness goodness in this world;

We celebrate the daily miracles of life and love;

We join in with the angels singing joyful songs on this Christmas morning.

We rejoice and praise you for your goodness to us.

Amen

Amazing God

We are astonished by the wonders of your creation,

Your generosity to us, your gift of life.

We thank you for the beauty of life which strikes us with awe.

You care for the greatest and the least.

Your splendour is seen by the poor of the earth the smallest of beings.

The gift of love which you offer to us through Jesus is a gift for all, with no limits and no discrimination.

We thank you that you reveal yourself to all creation:

May we have eyes to see and marvel on this Christmas morning

Amen

Christmas Message

By Karen Stallard, Union Chapel Minister

God plays hard to get

More often than not I struggle to believe that there is a God.

The stories from the bible seem difficult, far fetched and strange.

At Christmas we hear some of these stories, a miraculous birth, a guiding star, a bunch of angels, and although they are interesting stories and we enjoy hearing them, I am not sure they always help us to understand the God who may or may not exist behind these stories.



Then we get to the Easter story, again an interesting, rather distressing one, and still at the end of the story we are left struggling to 'get' this God which we are presented with, a God who allows a good man who is called God's son to die a terrible death but then to come back from the dead, and through that death and resurrection people might 'get' God.

Indeed God is so hard to get we have university degree courses, MAs and doctorates, we have thousands of books, websites, blogs, debates, discussions to try and work out this 'hard to get' God, and still we argue and fight about what God might be like. We have a large collection of books we call the bible, and even this book remains hard to get as scholars unravel the texts and interpreters present us with multiple meanings. It is no wonder, that some of the thinking people around have declared that God is so hard to get that God just doesn't exist.

Being a minister of religion I am presented with a dilemma: I am really rather sympathetic towards those who have declared that God is too hard to get and so God needs to be got rid of in our societies; God causes us more problems than solutions, however this got me thinking – If I do believe that God does exist then why is it he or she or it plays so hard to get? What is it about this God that we struggle to connect with?

And it made me wonder that if God exists then perhaps God is so different from us that we just don't get God. You know when you meet someone so different from yourself that you just don't get them? Well perhaps it is a bit like that with us and God.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Last week I heard a true story about a woman who was very different from myself: I was left wondering about this woman, I found her way of being so hard to get, her story is hard to believe and that is because there was something in her which was very different from me. I think that if God exists then God is a bit like this woman, hard to get because she is so very different from me.

Let me tell you the story.

A number of years ago, when there was still an apartheid in South Africa there was a family who lived in a black township. A woman, her husband and her son.

One day the chief of police drove to the woman's home, they took hold of her son and took him outside. They shot him in front of her and then drove off.

The grief stricken woman took her son's body and buried it as best she could in her garden. Some time later the chief of police came back to her home, he took her husband, put him in the car and drove him away saying nothing to the woman.



About a year later the chief of police came back to the woman's home, this time they took her, put her in the car and drove her to a remote place.

They pulled her out of the car and she was able to see her husband. He had been badly beaten and was chained up to some wooden posts.

Without an explanation they poured petrol over her husband and set the petrol alight. Her husband called out aloud to his wife while he was dying, "forgive them, for they know not what they do."

They then drove the woman back to her home.

Many years later when the apartheid was over there was a court case. The chief of police was being accused of terrible crimes and this woman had a chance to tell her story in front of a jury and in front of the chief of police as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee.

She told her story and then she was asked what she would like done with this man who had committed such awful crimes against her.

What do you think she said? What might you have said?

Well she said, I would like three things to be done with this man.

I would like him to drive me to the place where he killed my husband, so I can gather any dust and bones up and bury him properly with a Christian burial.

My son and my husband were my only family and so now I have no one to pour my love out over. This man has deprived me of my loved ones and so I would like him to visit my home once a month for the rest of his life so I can pour the love out on him which I would have otherwise poured out on my son and husband.

Finally I would like this man to know that I forgive him because that was my husband's last dying wish, and so I would like to at this very moment go to this man and embrace him so he may know my forgiveness.

And so the woman was guided over towards the chief of police and as she approached him he collapsed in a faint, too overwhelmed to stand in her presence.

If God exists then I believe God to be a bit like this woman. Very different from me, very hard to get, but demonstrating something which I long for in my own heart, the ability to forgive and seek reconciliation even with my worst enemy.



This woman was a Christian woman, she was seeking to be a bit like Jesus and was putting into practice the teaching to love your enemy, and perhaps this is where we might begin to try and understand this hard-to-get God, through the actions and teachings of Jesus and through the lives and stories of those who follow him. We can be despairing of the church and disparaging and dismissive of religious institutions, but when we are presented with a true follower of Jesus as this woman was, we can only wonder at such acts of love which are so hard to get.

God is hard to get because God's ways are not our ways, but through Christ we are given a glimpse of perhaps how they can become our ways.

Following stars and angels at Christmas time is all very lovely but what really matters is how we love one another this Christmas. I hope we can all capture something this evening of the spirit of this wonderful woman who demonstrates so beautifully with her moving story that which is so hard to get: a 'Godly' love which is hard to get, a love which clearly stretches beyond our normal human capabilities.

I think we can safely assume that God will always be hard to get if God exists, and perhaps we will only ever start to really 'get' God when we begin to live lives which reveal an alternative to hate and destruction. That, I believe is the real challenge of the Christian faith.