

## **Peace on earth.**

Do you know what the best Christmas present is?

Well, obviously, it's Jesus. But besides Jesus, do you know what the best Christmas present is? You know, one you might find have found under the Christmas tree this morning?

There's lots of good stuff, of course.

But you know what's best?

It's a dog! What a fantastic present a dog is!

I want to share a story of a family who got a dog for Christmas, and it's based on the story that Anna White-Atkins, the chaplain at Ravenswood School told at her commissioning about her family's dog, Argo.

Early one Christmas morning the family gathered at the Christmas tree, to find the best under-tree Christmas present ever – it was a dog! And the family loved that dog. They took turns hugging it, they filled its water and food bowls, they made up a bed for it in the laundry, everyone tried to sneak scraps of food to it from the Christmas lunch, and in the afternoon everyone had a turn taking it for a walk, and the dog even helped field in the traditional game of backyard cricket. It was a great day, and the dog was the best present any of them had ever found under a Christmas tree. They all went to bed happy.

Of course, a puppy isn't just for Christmas, and on boxing day, there were more hugs, more walks, more general enjoying of this newest member of the family. The dog's water and food bowls were refilled.

By the twenty-seventh, there wasn't so much competition to take the dog for a walk, refilling the food bowl was nearly forgotten, and the dog's fielding in backyard cricket was thought to be detracting from the game, rather than adding to it.

On the morning of the twenty-eighth, the family found their sofa wrecked. Shredded.

As much as they had all loved the dog on Christmas Day, and as great a present as it was... the sofa was trashed. And there was the dog, happily wagging its tail and looking around for more furniture (or phones, or toys, or books) to chew on.

Clearly this wasn't working, and they needed to do something.

They could keep the dog in a cage, of course.

This would solve their main problem. It might not be a lot of fun for the dog – particularly after all the fun it had had over the last few days. But the furniture and other household items would be safe.

I mean, what else could they do?

It was either live in a house wrecked by the dog, or lock the dog up in a cage, wasn't it?

There was no other option, was there?

But, of course, there was another option, and that was to love the dog, and to teach it how to be part of the family. And they took it to puppy obedience school, and they walked it and fed it and looked after it, and worked on the training, so the dog could be part of the family.

The dog was a good dog.

It wasn't perfect, of course, and sometimes it did the wrong thing, but the family loved it anyway, and forgave the dog, and kept it as part of the family. There was peace in the household. And they lived happily ever after.

Even if we're not pet owners, or dog people, I think we can relate to the story,

The world is a bit like the family's house – or at least it was. The world is a great place, there's natural beauty and riches and resources and plenty of space. We read in the book of Genesis "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1:31).

But we can look around at the world today and see that things aren't very good. What went wrong, we wonder? It was people – people like us. And not just people *like* us, but us. We all do the wrong thing, we all contribute to the problems of the world. Sure, some of us are worse than others, and I can honestly say I have never invaded Ukraine, or murdered anyone, or even stolen anything of great value. But I've spoken badly of others. I've certainly benefited from my position in society. And I've benefited from the exploitation of workers in third world countries... just to name a few things where I'm certainly guilty.

And no matter how hard we try, we're not going to fix all the problems of the world.

But there was one person who came into the world to put all things right, and that was Jesus, born in Bethlehem a little more than 2,000 years ago,

Instead of letting the world destroy itself, and instead of locking up humanity in the cosmic equivalent of a dog cage, God provided another way in that helpless baby in Bethlehem – a backwater town in Judea, not even the local capital of Jerusalem, let alone Rome which was the centre of the world at the time.

But this baby, the 'messiah', was born there, and his birth was announced to some shepherds working in the hills outside Bethlehem: As we heard in our reading, "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:91-11)

Of course, the story of the Messiah didn't end there, because that baby, Jesus, grew to become a teacher and a healer – someone who experienced all the things of human life...

Someone who would ultimately die on a cross, not too far from where he was born, to bring us into relationship with God, to fix the problems of the world.

And he opens the way to everlasting life to all who turn to him in faith. If we turn to Jesus, we won't be made perfect, but we will be forgiven for all the wrongs we have done. And while we will do better over time, we will still do the wrong thing from time to time, just as the family forgave the dog, so God, through the grace of Jesus, will forgive us.

As we approach a new year, we are aware, as much as ever, of all the problems of the world and our lives. We can choose to be part of what is wrong, or we can choose to accept the good news of the messiah that the angel brought to those shepherds all those years ago.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

Amen.