Our Christmas tree is now up and decorated. This is as a direct consequence of a daughter with two grandchildren in residence for a short stay. The challenge now is to keep it from wilting before Christmas day.   
  
I did go online to find how to keep a Christmas tree fresh. So I discovered Eight Steps for Keeping Your Christmas Tree Fresh.  
  
Sadly I failed at the very first step: #1 Go to a farm where you can cut your own tree. Clearly not written for the residents of Ormskirk. But the final line caught my eye – and here I quote: “How about you?”   
  
They actually were asking for other ideas but it seemed a pertinent question as we face a whole month of Christmas celebrations – how do we stay fresh?  
  
For at the heart of the Christmas story is the astonishing truth of the incarnation. And with two new born babies in the family this year, the wonder of the gift of Jesus becomes even more astounding.  
  
As Jim Packer reflects: "The divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needed to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child... The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets."  
  
For us today the wonder of the incarnation is one of sheer scale and dimension. That the God of this unimaginably huge universe should come to us as a baby is simply too much for our minds to absorb. “Welcome, all wonders in one sight! Eternity shut in a span.”  
  
But for those witnesses of the first Christmas their wonder was how the God of such awesome holiness could come among us as one of us. Such was the majesty of the God of Israel that his people dare not even pronounce his name. So the LORD speaks to Moses “But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” (Exodus 33:20)  
  
And yet the Word became flesh.   
  
But as our Christmas day service says: “We confess that we have allowed the most important event in history to become dulled by familiarity.”  
  
So how do we stay spiritually fresh during this holy season when there are so many distractions, so many demands on our time, our energy and our imagination?  
  
I guess the most important step is to simply ask the question. To realize that we have the responsibility of honouring Jesus aright as we celebrate his birth. Unlike the residents of Bethlehem we understand that need to make space for the coming of Jesus. Otherwise he will be crowded out, the inevitable consequence of this season of glitz.   
  
So what do we do?  
  
And as always the secret is in the preparation. You will know that time spent in preparation is never wasted – and the one thing I have learned in ministry, that it is never too early to prepare for Christmas. Otherwise we become so overwhelmed by tasks being done in a last minute frenzy that we miss the whole point of our activity.   
  
So what should be actually do?   
  
For me the daily Bible reading is essential, and something you have to fight to maintain. This coming Sunday is Bible Sunday, our annual push to encourage the discipline of daily Bible reading. There is simply no alternative but to decide to give God space each day to read a short passage of scripture as part of a planned programme. Then to pause, if only for a few moments, to give God that opportunity we so rarely give him, to speak.  
  
Incidentally, Jacqui is using a great app on her phone for her daily Bible reading. It’s the Bible in One Year, published free from Alpha International with a daily commentary by Nicky and Pippa Gumbel. Just go to Google Play Store or ITunes.   
  
And then to make sure that we honour God in how we allocate our time. For myself, I always go to the Saturday afternoon carol event at the Cathedral. Normally I cannot spare the time – too much is happening at church and in the family. But I make myself go. Just to sit down and be ministered. A relatively small investment with a very high yield.   
  
But the source of spiritual freshness does not come from our resources; it comes from the spring of the Holy Spirit. It’s not what I do but what God has done which counts.   
  
And this gift is always a gift of grace, to be received with gratitude. All we do is receive. I guess that has to be the main message of Christmas.   
  
So Jesus, promises: ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’’   
  
May God keep us spiritually fresh this Christmas.