**A baby called Jesus**

I have been to prison twice this year! Once back in March and again on a December evening when a group of us visited Sudbury Open Prison to lead an evening of relaxed singing with some of the men.

It was quite a profound experience… I had never been ‘inside’ before! Standing facing these men, it was difficult to comprehend that they were in custody and we were free. They seemed so ordinary, very welcoming and amazingly polite. They could be one of us, or we could be one of them. Quite easily.

It seemed most had accepted their circumstances, their punishment, their debt to society and were resolved to live differently when they regained their freedom.

What does this have to do with Christmas, the baby in the manger and all that? Well the clue’s in the name…. names were very important in Bible times,as they are now, but back then they were seen to reveal something of a person’s character and role in life. Matthew’s account of the birth of this special baby says he would be named Jesus ‘for he will save his people from their sins’ (Matthew 1:21). *Sins?* What are they? This is an old fashioned word!Well we might understand sin as anything that offends God and others: those with whom we live, work and worship. Falling short of what God intends for us all; our attitudes, thoughts, and behaviour. But not us surely? I’ve heard it said “I’m not a bad person, I haven’t done this or that”, those serious crimes for which people deserve the consequences…

Yet if we are honest with ourselves there are some ways in which we are no better than those who have got the wrong side of the law, and we might be enslaved to attitudes and behaviour from which we wish we could be released.

At Christmas we wonder at this new life, this new-born baby, Jesus. And we wonder that in this tiny life God embraced human life with all its faults and failings. But babies grow up - some say far too quickly - and this baby grew up to become someone sure of his identity and calling to be the one through whom God would fulfil ancient promises to *release captives* and *set free the oppressed*. And Jesus lived up to his name, *Saviour* not by being a great person; not by his inspired teaching; not by his exemplary lifestyle; but by his death on a cross for the sin of all humanity, for the sin of you and me, setting us free.

That’s why we celebrate his birthday at Christmas.

And of this Jesus the hymn-writer says:

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin*

*He sets the prisoner free*

It’s what this baby came to do - the clue’s in his name.

Have a blessed Christmas

Kevin