How strange it is to see people, many of whom we know so well, taking part in Christmas worship in our own church – but wearing masks. Some of us might only have seen this in a streamed or recorded version, and some might not have been able to see anything this year of our own church. But I guess that wearing a mask has become something we are all familiar with.

The masks remind us of our own need for protection, but they also indicate that if we were in church, we would not be permitted to sing the Christmas carols that are such an important and popular part of our celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and child of Mary.

And in this year of extraordinary turbulence, the mask speaks unexpectedly to us about the Word of God who is Jesus Christ, made flesh living among us. This year we understand that in Jesus Christ, God comes among us unprotected, with the needs that every new-born baby brings.

In Jesus Christ, the Son of God is unprotected against the need for food and clothing, for warmth and shelter and dependency on the love of others. He is unprotected against the sorrows and the joys of life, the impact of disease and the cruel misuse of power. Ultimately he is unprotected against betrayal and death itself.

This is what we would sing about in our Christmas carols.

Some churches have choirs that can be socially distanced and we have been very fortunate that Chichester cathedral choir has recorded a selection of our favourite carols to use in church or at home, and indeed they have also produced a brief carol service for us to watch on-line, if we have that facility.

We all miss the joy of singing together, but it might just be that this year we have an opportunity to learn something new. Now is the moment to listen more intently to the words of familiar carols and to the words of the Bible that narrate the mystery of this festival.

The gospel of St Luke tells us that shepherds are startled by something so amazing that it compels them to abandon their watch and go in search of this mystery: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace”. The message of the angels captivates and enchants the minds of the shepherds, like the music and singing of carols that tell us it is Christmas.

The shepherds are hardy people, used to being out in all weathers, at all times of the day and night, facing danger and supporting each other – rather like those who work in the fishing industry of our own day.

These burley guys come bursting into the intimacy of new birth, finding mother and child together, a manger used as a makeshift crib. Like any of us, they are enraptured by this sight: a baby, in whom we see with such ease the beauty of the gift of life and the potential for how we might use that gift.

As we listen to the words of the Christmas carols this year, some themes seem to me to emerge with particular importance for us in the midst of the COVID pandemic and unresolved questions about our future economic and political life.

The first theme is that of human dignity. The Son of God who comes to us unprotected against the uncertainty of human life, finds a home in a family with Mary and Joseph, who know the value of human labour and the complexity of relationships. Human dignity is shaped by how we use our skills and how we behave towards other people. Its virtues of compassion, honesty, courage, and love transcend all barriers of time, of condition and of language.

“With the poor, and mean and lowly, lived on earth our Saviour holy” – these are familiar words from a Christmas carol. They invite us to look more deeply at what kind of behaviour we should learn and should display, if we are to live well, Christ-like, as Christians, in today’s society.

The second theme is kindness, especially the kindness of strangers. When the time comes for Mary to give birth, she is a stranger, away from home, in an overcrowded small town that simply does not have the facilities to manage the human demands of an imperial census. But kind people look after Mary and she is safely delivered of her child.

Carols across the ages have expressed intense kindness for mother and child. Many of them have taken the form of a lullaby which also hints that this child, who will tell the unforgettable parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, will be the one who definitively shows us the loving kindness and mercy of God.

Finally, there is a strong sense in the Christmas carols of the realism of this mystery of Christmas. The Son of God comes unprotected among us, and comes in reality.

One of the most delicate 15th century English carols compares Mary with a rose. With playful theological insight, it states that “in this rose containéd was, both heaven and earth in little space”.

The familiarity of the music, the words, and the crib-scenes that form our Christmas celebrations, should not diminish the real sense of wonder that this mystery demands. “Heaven and earth in little space” is a neat pointer to what cannot be understood by reason and logic; only the reverence of love and worship can unlock the meaning.

This theme of realism speaks arrestingly of Jesus Christ as fully human and fully divine. In this bold statement we discover the social and evangelistic significance of seeing that God comes to us unprotected.

The Christmas crib illustrates what the gospels tell us. We do not need protection from each other: rather, we need to learn reverence for each other, as the children of one Father in heaven.

Nurturing a deep and courageous reverence for human dignity, and the practice of loving-kindness, in God’s blend of justice, truth and mercy, one for another, is the lesson that we learn from the words of our carols and the Christmas reading of the Bible.

My hope and prayer is that you will have the best Christmas possible, this year. And in the year head, when we have worshipped and adored Jesus Christ, God-with-Us, may our lives sing with the quality of his presence, on earth as in heaven.