

This Christmas should be a time for sharing, togetherness, faith, and hope in the wake of the hardships of the last two years, according to voices in this year's Church of England Christmas advert.

The four-minute promotional film, which is premiered today, features powerful personal reflections from people in a wide range of walks of life, speaking about what Christmas means to them.

It forms the centrepiece of the Church of England's Advent and Christmas campaign #AtTheHeartOfChristmas which encourages people to hear the real Christmas story through their local church.

The soundtrack for the film is a new carol version of In the Bleak Midwinter by one of the country's top young composers, Rebecca Dale, which has been released as a single earlier this week.

The track, recorded by St Martin's Voices, under the direction of Andrew Earis, in the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, has already reached the top of the classical charts.

Local churches across the country will be welcoming their communities – onsite and online – to celebrate and share the good news of Christ's birth with special services and events, supported by a wide range of national resources.

The resources include daily reflections over Christmas, available as a booklet, or free by email or on the #AtTheHeartOfChristmas app, as well as in audio form which can be accessed on Alexa and Google Home smart devices.

The film takes a look at what is "At the heart of Christmas" through personal stories, tales of hardships overcome, generosity, faith, Christmas memories and hopes for the future.

Those taking part include frontline workers and volunteers who served their communities throughout the pandemic, clergy, a family, and pupils and teachers at a school in Hereford.

They sum up what is at the heart of Christmas for them through words including hope, family, happiness, togetherness, sharing and love.

Some speak about being separated from friends and family during lockdowns and looking forward to singing carols and meeting together, which were not possible for many people last Christmas amid the pandemic restrictions.

The Revd Tasha Critchlow, a hospital chaplain in London, speaks about the challenges of the past 18 months, adding: "Christmas brings people together in their desire to fight darkness and to find light."

Kim Rowbotham, from Kettering, speaks about the challenges for bereaved people over the Christmas period, drawing through her own experience in losing her daughter.

“There is so much comfort and hope that I take from the Christmas story,” she says.

“Jesus came in to the world, this broken world, to give us a certain hope.”

She adds: “If I had to sum up Christmas in one word that word would be love.”

The Patelia family, in West London, pick up the theme, describing how faith was crucial in overcoming the recent challenges before speaking of how at the heart of Christmas is God’s love.

And children at St Thomas Cantilupe CofE Academy in Hereford speak about their excitement at looking forward to Christmas while their teachers highlight the joy of singing carols again.

Headteacher Claire McKeown said: “It was a real honour to share what ‘the heart of Christmas’ means to us as a school, the sense of pride in what we have worked together to achieve and the importance that our vision, to enable every child to ‘shine bright their light’ is reflected in this special film.”

Amaris Cole, the Church of England’s Head of Digital, said: “The stories in the film reflect what we have heard time and again about the challenges and hardships people have faced but also the comfort and inspiration they draw from faith in Jesus Christ.

“This Christmas, as we celebrate God coming into the world as a baby, will perhaps be all the more meaningful as a result.

“Amid the restrictions on gatherings over the last two years, local churches have found amazing innovative ways to connect with their communities and to worship.

“Many of us are looking forward to returning to celebrating in person in church this Christmas but there are also thousands of online services and events available wherever you are.

“You are welcome online and on-site to celebrate with us and discover what is really at the heart of Christmas through your local church.”

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