

Christmas is not cancelled

This Sunday's headlines (20/12/20) include the words, 'Will this nightmare ever end?', 'Bozo stuffs Xmas', 'Christmas cancelled for millions', 'Covid-19 wrecks Christmas', and perhaps the worst of all, 'Mutant Virus kills Xmas'!¹

But we know that Christmas is not cancelled.

Yes, we are not worshipping together in person as we would like to do, we are not gathering friends and family around our tables, we are not carolling at midnight on Christmas Eve, we cannot travel to spend time with one another – but Christmas is not cancelled.

At this precious time of year in 2020 it is important to recognise that there is much to lament because much has been lost. Lives, livelihoods, opportunities, loved ones who have died. It is clear that Jesus comes to bring hope to a world which has a closer relationship with sadness this year.

Yet, this Christmas we continue to celebrate the story of God's love, God who is born on earth to an ordinary family called to extraordinary things, to a girl, birthing in a stable, having journeyed, uncomfortably, a long way from home.

Mary who is so young and yet in tune with the message of God.

Mary whose yes to God's possibilities makes such a difference to the whole world.

Jesus comes and this year, perhaps more than ever for many, we hold on to the light that enters our darkness, so vulnerable but transforming. In Ashford many churches and homes have participated in a local project, 'Windows of light' to decorate windows for those who pass by and remind them of the hope in the Christmas story.

Mary's yes has made all the difference and we honour that. Others have said yes too.

Joseph, visited by an angel stands by her, shepherds who leave their flocks to be the first visitors, Wise men who journey from far places, those who make mistakes but ultimately arrive. Since then so many others have said, and continue to say, 'yes' to their part in God's story. This story has not lost its power, or resonance but echoes through the ages.

At the time, it was a birth, in a busy town full of people gathered for a census, visitors, strangers, bursting inns – no social distancing there. The arrival might have caused some consternation, we hope that local people helped the young Mary, there might have been singing on the hills and shepherds passing through, but many would have seen it as just another birth in a crowded place.

I think this matters. It matters that this is not a celebrity birth, a birth surrounded by wealth or prestige, a birth well publicised by royalty but it is a royal birth nevertheless. It matters that God comes, not to the high or mighty, the powerful or proud, but to a family in much humbler circumstances. When we hear the words, God is with us, we know that God is with us through Mary, through Joseph, through shepherds, through those who reflect and

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-the-papers-55382075>

journey, through those who provide front line care, those who go unnoticed making multiple deliveries on winter evenings, those who drive for miles, those who respond to emergencies, those working in the gig economy, those who battle on caring for loved ones at home. We know that God comes to the humble, those who just get on with it, but those whose kindness often keeps us going. In one of our local shops where we often buy a newspaper there is a particularly kind shop assistant whose friendliness is such that he makes lots of people, who he often recognises, smile. He has kept it up all the way through our lockdowns.

There is hope in Christmas for all those who think themselves unnoticed.

It matters because we are reminded that small things really make a difference, that God chooses the fragility of a tiny child to arrive amongst us. We have come to understand better our common fragility, our interdependence this year. Rowan Williams has recently written of our solidarity in being shaken². We have realised we are not invincible, we cannot tame nature in the way we believed possible, we cannot manage apart and separate from others.

We know that tiny gestures change things - being alongside our neighbours, a simple prayer, random acts of kindness – all these things that we might believe to be small are acts of love that might change the world for someone else.

It matters because this is a story that reminds us of our own place in God's story. This is not a story for those who have more learning, more experience, more capability. This is a not a story just for those who are qualified, or lead or seem to know more than us. This is a story about you and me – about our shepherds, those living on the edge who are called to play key parts, each of us called and reminded that we are precious., loved, blessed as God comes to us and God is with us, no matter what.

Hope is very present, in collaboration, in scientists, in shared endeavour. Hope is there in our communities, schools, hospitals, interconnectedness.

We are disappointed, of course we are. We are sad that we cannot see those we love this Christmas. We are desperate for those who are lonely, those who are grieving, those who are uncertain about what the future holds. We might even ask, when will this nightmare end? And yet, God still comes in Jesus, to remind us that the light goes on shining and will not be overcome. We still love our families and loved ones even when we are far apart and however fragile we feel, we are still God's precious loved people.

The light shines on. May the hope of Christmas grant you peace this year as we welcome Jesus, the Prince of Peace, into our hearts, homes and communities. Amen.

Prayer

² *Candles in the Dark, Faith, hope and love in a time of pandemic* R Williams, 2020

When it's cold and wet, and we long for the light, come Christmas.
Come to bring warmth and joy
to inn-keepers and travellers
to shepherds and kings;
Come to bring hope and peace
for refugees and security forces;
Come to comfort the lonely
and wipe the tear from the cheek of those who are sad.

Immanuel – God with us, let your light shine
into the dark recesses of our minds and our cities.
In this Christmas where there is sickness, uncertainty and much brokenness
Let your warmth bring forth harvests of joy.
Let your peace enter the hearts
of those who care, paramedics in the midst of night, midwives welcoming new life, nurses
battling competing demands and longing for relief.
Let your peace enter the hearts
of those who criticise, those who are consumed by stress,
those who struggle and plot for power and advantage over others.

Come, Christmas God
Christ-Child of Bethlehem
Spirit of wonder, be born in us and your world once more,
grant us hope
that joy may be shared, peace proclaimed
and love abound.

Adapted from a prayer by Kate Mclhagga