

Bishop Michael's Pastoral Letter for December 2020

'Christmas this year will not be like any other we have known': we will all have heard that many times of late. At the time of my writing this, it is not clear what restrictions we will be subject to in December; but it does seem very likely that much of what we are accustomed to will not be possible in the usual way. There are likely to be constraints on family gatherings. Eating and drinking together will be very complicated. Opportunities to sing carols will be much reduced. Many people will be experiencing challenging levels of anxiety, isolation, poverty and mental health issues.

Does all this mean that Christmas will be cancelled this year, or at least dramatically diminished? We only have to reflect for a minute on the meaning of the word 'Christmas' to realise this cannot be true: it is the celebration of Jesus Christ, the 'Great Little One' in whom our God comes to us. As so much of what we have taken for granted is absent or muted this Christmas, perhaps the very heart of our celebration can stand with more clarity in a new light; perhaps we can focus more attentively on the truth which gives meaning to this great story. That is the truth of God's boundless mercy for us, which brings him to share our life as one of us: Sacred infant, all divine, / What a tender love was thine: / Thus to come from highest bliss / Down to such a world as this. The baby born at Bethlehem is not introduced to a comfortable, easy or settled life. From the outset the Holy Family knows the meaning of anxiety, displacement and suffering; remembering that should itself give us hope.

So the heart of Christmas this year will be the same as every year, and indeed it may be easier for us to see what that heart is. The numbers with whom we can meet as family and friends may be few, but Christ will surely make his home among us if we welcome him in. We may not sit down to so many or so exuberant meals, or indulge in so many cheerful social drinks together; but he still gives us his body and blood as food and drink to strengthen us. We may not be able to belt out our favourite Christmas carols in church as usual, but the song of the angels is not silenced, telling the good news of salvation, and urging us, like they urged the shepherds: 'Do not be afraid'.

Knowing that there is so much sadness, darkness and anger around us and within us, perhaps we can recapture this year the meaning of Advent: that our God loves this fallen world, and us his hurting children, so much, that he decides to come as Emmanuel, God with us. The poet and priest R S Thomas imagines that momentous decision like this in his poem *The Coming*:

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

+Michael
Bishop of Lichfield