

‘Christmas isn’t cancelled’ — Welby and C of E come to terms with tier 4

BY [PAT ASHWORTH](#)
21 DECEMBER 2020



The Archbishop of Canterbury leaves BBC Broadcasting House in central London after appearing on The Andrew Marr Show on Sunday

NO ONE is obliged to go to church on [Christmas](#) Day, including clerics whose health would be compromised, the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#) told *The Andrew Marr Show* on BBC1 on Sunday, the morning that tier 4 restrictions came into force.

But Christmas was not cancelled, he said. “The celebrations are cancelled. We will come to those again. This is very different to what we hoped for and longed for, and it is the most intense pain for a lot of people. We protest, we lament. And in our prayers and in our services we will be doing that.

“But it’s not cancelled, because at the heart of Christmas is Jesus coming into the world, God coming into the world. . . This is a moment of God saying: ‘I am with you in the mess and I have overcome the darkness. There is hope.’”

Archbishop Justin Welby was speaking as dioceses and churches looked at the implications of the new regulations, and were working out how to act accordingly.

Asked what he would say, as a Christian leader, about the pain of those struggling with illness or bereavement, Archbishop Welby acknowledged that facing a Christmas with people missing from the table was “very hard, and that pretending otherwise is not helpful. We have to face our losses, and unless in one way or another we make something of the memories, they attack us.”

He said that he was no stranger to Christmases spent alone, which he had done when he was younger — “I remember one in particular” — and that he had no illusions about how dark could be.

“Ring, share and plan. . . Something about planning for the future helps us to dream. What are you going to do, what are we going to do when this time is over?”

Asked what he might say to an 80-year-old devout Christian who was watching the programme and wondering how to balance health with the desire to go to church on Christmas Day, he said: “You know much better than I do what you should do. Don’t feel under compulsion, do what is sensible.

“My mother, who is in her 90s, will not go to church, I’m sure, because it’s too dangerous. There are clergy who have underlying health conditions who will not go to church. I will be in church, God willing, and for your 80-year-old, I’d say: get out, get some fresh air if you can, if you’re fit enough to walk. But talk to people, look at something on the television, ring the [\[C of E Daily\] Hope](#) line, which has services and prayers and candles and talks for Christmas. Do what you can, and not what you can’t.”

Archbishop Welby is due to preach from [Canterbury Cathedral](#) on Christmas morning, which will be broadcast live online.

The [Bishop of London](#), the Rt Revd Sarah Mullally, who chairs of the C of E’s Covid recovery group, echoed those sentiments in the light of the

danger from the new strain of the coronavirus, now “out of control” in the south of England, according to the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock.

Bishop Mullally told Radio Kent on Sunday that people needed to look at their own personal situation and the situation in their community, and pointed out that 17,000 churches now had worship online.

“This is a really unique situation. We have experienced nothing like this in our lifetime,” she said. “We will all have watched the number of cases go up and the comments about pressure on the hospitals, so we do need to take care of ourselves, our family and our friends and stay safe until the vaccine is rolled out.

“People need to do what they have been doing: stand alongside each other even if they can’t be with each other.”

She continued: “Churches are open, some of them physically in their buildings but they have made provision to make it safer. . . Fewer people, ticketed services. Take a look at the [Church Near You](#) website and what your local church is doing. What we hope is to offer comfort and hope at this really difficult time.”

The Church of England published revised guidelines on Monday, taking the new tier 4 restrictions into account ([News, 19 December](#)). People in a tier 4 area — more than 16 million people across England, including in the capital — must not leave their homes without “reasonable excuse”, though that does permit attending a place of worship.

In these areas, however, no church services or carol singing are permitted in public outdoor places that are not churchyards or other outdoor church premises, it states. People can travel to church, but are advised not to travel outside a tier 4 area.

A maximum of six persons are permitted at a wedding in tier 4, but the 30-person rule for funerals still applies. Physical meetings in churches and church halls are not permitted, nor are homegroup meetings in homes or vicarages. Youth services — supervised activities for children and young people — are permitted in the lower tiers but not in tier 4. In both tiers 3 and 4, church buildings must not be used to provide concert hall or theatre services at any time.

A statement on Monday from the [diocese of Chelmsford](#), which is in tier 4, explained: “We are expecting many of the churches in our diocese to change their plans and move to online worship.

“We currently have the highest infection rates in the country in Essex and East London, and we are giving our church leaders encouragement and support to take what we know are very difficult decisions in order to protect people in their communities, especially the most vulnerable.”

The plight of Christians brought sympathy from Senior Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg of the New North London Synagogue, who wished to express his concern for the faithful through the *Church Times*.

He writes: “My heart goes out to Christian colleagues and communities as Christmas approaches and it becomes clear how limited gatherings and family celebrations will be.

“We struggled over the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement when families could not come together as accustomed, and long and beautiful services had to be curtailed and numbers limited. We were deeply aware that many people stayed home to protect themselves and shield others when they would have loved to be together. Yet we were upheld by that profound sense of spiritual solidarity which sustains all faith communities.

“We all hoped that the situation across the country and throughout the world would be better by Christmas, and that congregations would be able to sing together and grandparents and grandchildren share festive tables in safety. I can’t help thinking of my fellow clergy and the cathedrals and churches celebrating midnight mass in this strange year.

“In these difficult times solidarity of spirit across our different faiths and philosophies matters more than ever. These frightening and bewildering months have shown us how interdependent we all are and how deeply we need one another across the whole of our society.

“Our liturgies may differ, but we stand together in praying for a safer, more peaceful, sustainable and compassionate world.”