

Archdiocese of Southwark



Homily by The Most Reverend John Wilson

**The Mayor's Christmas Carol Service • Southwark Cathedral
Monday 16 December 2019**

Dear friends

It was early September when I first saw a Selection Box on sale in a supermarket. By mid-October I heard someone say they were already fed up with Christmas. In late November someone told me they thought Christmas was a waste of time and money, and couldn't be over quick enough. Most recently, I went to buy some festive decorations from a garden centre. An assistant said she was very sorry but they'd been put away to get the shelves ready for January. There wasn't much '*Ho, Ho, Ho*' about any of it!

I don't think we've quite reached a stage where Christmas is a Marmite issue. For some though, it will, sadly, bring anguish and isolation, with the reality of poverty made more acute. And in the aftermath of the General Election we all need to rededicate ourselves to working for the good of each other, of our city, and of our country as a whole.

Despite everything, the vast majority of people do want to embrace some yuletide cheer. And, thankfully, there are so many who will look beyond their own comfort to serve others over the holiday season. We think particularly of those across London – our emergency service personnel and NHS staff; our social and community services; our charities and volunteer networks – all of whom will continue to care for us, protect us, and support us.

There is, though, a problem with Christmas. Stuck on life's conveyor belt, we can struggle to pause and cherish the gift it offers. Looking forward to something wonderful, and wishing away something terrible, is all quite understandable. But the urgency of modern living so easily robs us of any ability to savour the 'here and now,' to live the present moment. So much of today is overshadowed by yesterday and already too full of tomorrow. But Christmas, at least momentarily, offer us an alternative.

In churches and schools, city squares and shopping centres, a small scene will be constructed for the next few weeks. There will be some kind of shed or cave, with straw scattered across its floor. A cow and a donkey will provide the backdrop for a Holy Family huddled together. The proud father and devoted mother look down on their baby. Simple sheep farmers stand gazing on one side while bejewelled monarchs kneel adoringly on the other. For a moment, time seems to stand still. There's a space for everyone and the peace of that silent and holy night reaches the now of our existence. The God of all things enters the world in human flesh. A child is born for us, tiny and vulnerable. At the heart of Christmas eternity breaks into history, heaven touches earth. All is calm, all is bright. The here and now becomes a time to savour a Son given to us in the stillness of the present moment.

Individuals, couples and families, will come before this nativity scene and pause in prayerful wonder. In quiet contemplation, we stop, just for a second or two, before the infant king who brings a new way of living and a new way of loving. In this human life, one that knew tears and smiles as we do, God's unfolding love for the world finds a foothold on our planet. From the crib to the cross, Jesus is the one for others. His gifts are forgiveness, peace, and joy. His ways are justice, integrity, and solidarity. His word is truth and his power is love, a love from which no one is excluded. In that silence pause before poor family of Bethlehem hope is rekindled.

Whoever we are, whatever our belief, might it be possible this Christmas to learn something, anew or again, from the lesson of the crib? Over these coming

days of Christmas, might we appreciate more the present moment resisting the temptation to 'get it over with'? Could we be especially attentive to the people that we will encounter, both the friend and the stranger?

Of course none of us can live in slow motion, but do we really want to be on constant fast forward? How can we more consciously treasure the Christmas present, especially in relation to the people we love and those suffering and in distress?

The timeless values of the Christmas crib are harmony, generosity, and a love that builds peace. Perhaps this Christmas we can allow the time to pass just a little bit more slowly, not to bore us silly, but so that we can value all that is beautiful and holy in our lives together, with new wonder, with deeper appreciation, and with greater gratitude.

May God bless you and your loved ones, and all those across London, this Christmas. And may God renew within each of us an enduring spirit of peace throughout the coming New Year.



The Most Reverend John Wilson, Archbishop of Southwark and Metropolitan © M. Mazur