

Set I: Luke 2.1-14; Isaiah 9.2-7

Set III: Isaiah 52: 7-10; John 1.1-14

Christmas Eve & Day; 2020 Zoom Services @ St. Andrew's Vicarage, 11:15pm & 10:30am

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer (Ps 19:14)

There are times in any nation's life when the state authorities intervene in fairly dramatic ways – these can be anything from times of crisis, such as we have lately experienced throughout 2020, to times for administration, when it's deemed necessary to conduct an election or a census. The effect of such times on us is that we are required to 'do something', to participate, like Joseph & Mary, in a registration, a referendum or a public vote, to travel to, or stay away, from a particular area, or to attend at a particular place, i.e. to receive an inoculation.

So far this year, we've variously been told to keep our distance, to wash & sanitize our hands, to wear masks when out and about, to restrict our travel, to work from home if we can, occasionally with our children, and/or to stay at home with them or be alone whenever possible. We haven't yet been required to travel to our place of birth for registration, but who knows, maybe that will happen next!

So, the question I want to ask this year is, what are we to 'do' about Christmas 2020? Or about any Christmas really? There have been many headlines telling us about how politicians have 'cancelled Christmas' with their tiers and restrictions and we may yet go into another 'lockdown' of sorts, which is effectively what the new tier 4 is about, but then I don't suppose Christmas 1939 was much of a laugh either.

We'll all no doubt try to make something festive out of what remains possible today, but Christmas without loved ones, a bit of a party, a good meal around a table with friends or family, without these things, it's going to be challenging.

None of us 'like' being told what to do, (it's why God doesn't!) but we do what we do by consent and because we believe that the law should be obeyed, even if it can sometimes be an 'Ass'. Because, largely at any rate, we believe these are the right things to do and that we'll all be better for doing them, for trusting that this is wisdom, that governments, health authorities, lawyers, doctors and emergency services are all acting in our best interests. We place our faith in these folk whenever we believe in them.

Some folk out there in the world consider that people like us, who share a faith in divinity and who follow an Abrahamic religion, i.e. Judaism, Christianity or Islam, are deluded. That we are irrational and being misguided for believing in a greater, higher, benevolent power at work in the world trying, but not forcing us, into ways of love, forgiveness and compassion.

But then there have also been plenty of conspiracy theorists out there lately, encouraged by social media, who have sought to undermine what they see as our misplaced faith, either because mistrust has come to dominate their lives, or because they genuinely believe that we're all being deceived. Whether it's about the effects of climate change; about the dangers of the new 5G phone network; about Covid and the danger it 'really' represents; about the Covid vax actually being an insidious opportunity to impregnate us with tracking devices; or about Brexit and the dire, or positive, effects it will usher in, we're all having to decide for ourselves just quite what to believe.

I sometimes think that the world must seem a pretty cruel Creation, without much love in it, to those who have no faith. Of course, it's easy to dismiss, to laugh or to scoff at a view that's different to the 'common sense' of our own. Some folk even consider that people who think conspiratorially are mentally ill, but there is a different, more compassionate way to think about such thinking too.

Many irrational beliefs are attempts to protect mental health by responding to our human need for control, understanding, and belonging. The most radical theory about Covid is, I submit, denialism, that the virus does not exist or is nowhere near as dangerous as is commonly believed. Powerful individuals, companies, or state actors are responsible for the hype, with motives ranging from world domination, to making money, to the suppression of freedom.

There is a powerful human drive for causal understanding, and people generally tend to prefer explanations that make reference to planned intentions rather than accidental outcomes, especially if the finger points to a long-suspected 'agent'. Seeing the event as planned rather than accidental allows people to maintain a sense of control over a reality that is confusing and unpredictable.

Also, if there is someone to blame, we can restore some kind of balance to the universe by seeking to expose/punish the culprits for their evil conduct. Then, we can prevent them from harming us next time - I'm thinking now of a certain outgoing President rushing to execute sentences of death. This illusion of control, because that's what control often is, contributes to our optimism about the future and helps us cope effectively with adversity. We have too little control over the pandemic, & this is scary.

To answer the question I posed earlier, 'what are we to do about Christmas?' – my answer is, 'just give thanks', because God's already done all he can in Christ to save us – the rest is up to us. For those who believe that a little baby born in a manger was that salvation,

- was actually a taster of eternity,
- was a time when heaven and earth met,
- was when God lifted us from the darkness within to the light of his presence
- taking us from despair & depression to hope and love
- from anxiety & bewilderment to new, refreshing serenity
- who brought us from the fears of today to the hope of tomorrow

(Sr. Teresa White – Faithful Companions of Jesus, Salford)

...there is a peace that surpasses understanding. This peace is arrived at in always acting out of love & compassion, in the embrace of suffering & forgiveness, and in forever giving thanks for the gift of faith brought to us by the little child, born again in our hearts today. Can we make him room?

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. *Amen.**