



THE ARCHBISHOP
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I can't stop thinking about those little boys from Birmingham who fell through the ice and died.

And about their families. How hard this Christmas is going to be for them. And that policeman, who tried to save them, who I think might still be in hospital, recovering from hypothermia himself.

And I can't stop thinking about those terrified, desperate refugees, exploited by wicked and unscrupulous people traffickers, getting into little boats on the northern coast of France to try to cross the channel into this country on bitterly cold nights crossing bitterly cold waters. Last week many had to be saved from those waters. And some drowned.

And these past few evenings, when I've taken the dog out for those last necessary things that dogs must do before bedtime, I stand in the cold and think about those who are going to be cold all through the night. Families huddled together in Kyiv or Mariupol. Anxious parents looking for children that won't be coming home. Homeless people sleeping on the streets. Refugees in little boats.

Needless to say, I don't have the answers to this world's problems, and like everyone else, I look forward to a happy Christmas with my family around me. But increasingly, when I look at the Christmas story, I see such resonances with the travails of our world. A little family, making a journey in the cold. Nowhere to stay, but the outhouse at the back of a pub. A wicked and terrifying genocide by a tyrant King, who, in wanting to kill this child, is prepared to kill every other child as well. Mothers weeping inconsolably for the death of their little boys. And one vulnerable refugee family fleeing to safety in a foreign land, that is, the holy family, Jesus and Mary and Joseph.

And when I examine the story, I learn three things. First, that it is the story of God's complete involvement with the story of our world, in all its joy and sorrow. Secondly, a challenge to decide whose side I'm on as the same stories of dislocation, exile, and need play out across our world today. And thirdly, an invitation to assist and serve others in their need and work for a world where more of this need is eradicated.

When he grew up, and hearing where he was from, someone once said of Jesus, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Now, Nazareth you may be interested to learn is in the north. So where have we heard this before? And don't we labour under the same misapprehensions and confusions today? Too much wealth and power located in one place. And it's not up here!

Yet, what our country could do with is a dose of northern common sense. That won't change everything, but it may restore a bit of balance. It might help us attend to the things that really matter, the things that any good householder would attend to, making sure that everyone has a fair share and an equal opportunity.

Let me offer one small, but significant, example. Before I was Archbishop of York, I was first, the Bishop of Reading, and then the Bishop of

Chelmsford. In Chelmsford, my house was near a place called Shenfield. Reading and Shenfield are the two ends of the new nearly £19 billion Elizabeth Line. At great expense, travel from one side of London to another has got a whole lot quicker and easier. As I lived at either end of this huge project, I saw the investment and I saw the difference it will make to many people’s lives, making journeys easier, and creating wealth and opportunity. But nothing like this has happened in the north.

Recently, a group of northern mayors got together with the new Transport Secretary to discuss this issue. I was amused to learn that West Yorkshire’s mayor, Tracy Brabin, was delayed because of a cancelled train; and that the North of Tyne mayor, Jamie Driscoll, attended remotely because rail services from Newcastle to Manchester are so unreliable. The message that the group delivered was a joint action plan on railways. For in the north, we know that the lack of efficient, reliable transport is hampering growth. But we also know that when we work together, and when we represent the communities of this region with one voice, then that voice can make a difference.

None of this will be any solace to those bereft families in Birmingham. Nor refugees awaiting a fair hearing. Nor the many of us facing energy bills that are higher than ever, and all the other difficult decisions that go with this.

But if the Christmas story reminds us of long and difficult journeys. If it inspires us to help others. If it assures us that God is with us. Even in the darkest of times, we can begin to build a better world.



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