



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop today delivered his first Christmas Day sermon in York Minster as part of the Solemn Eucharist Service at 11am.

The sermon follows in full:

Earlier this year, during the heart of the first lockdown, I took the funeral of a colleague who had died from cancer. As the service in the crematorium chapel began, there was his widow, on her own, socially distanced from her children. She couldn't touch or embrace them. They couldn't touch or embrace her. I hold it as an image of what this year has been for us.

Overwhelmed by grief, stymied by fear, uncertain of the future, we have, to one painful degree or another, become separated from each other. We've had to. It's been the right thing to do. We've found other ways of meeting. And that's been good. But nothing quite replaces human touch.

Christmas was always going to be different this year. And difficult. We knew we wouldn't be able to do the things we wanted. We knew our celebrations would be restricted. But with the unwelcome arrival of a new and virulent strain of Covid19, even these small plans have had to be cancelled or cut back. There will be unopened presents around our Christmas trees today. There will be empty places at our tables. Many of us will be on our own.

Our poorest communities have been hit hardest. Lockdown is easier if you live in a large house with a garden. And you can work from home if yours is the sort of job that can be done on a computer or over the 'phone. But for many lower paid jobs this isn't even an option. And going to work puts you in danger. And while some have been furloughed, others have lost their jobs altogether.

And that's before we've even started to imagine – if we can – what it's like to be hungry or homeless in Britain today, as is the grim reality for far too many of our... now what shall I call them? These people who have suffered and are suffering so much? Fellow citizens? Or just lump them together and call them 'the poor' or 'the homeless' or 'the destitute', as if they weren't people like you and me?

The Christian faith offers me only one title. They are my sisters and brothers. They are the ones for whom Christ came. They are the ones to whom I owe a debt of responsibility because of our common humanity.

How do I know this? Because of what happened in Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

The world might be very understandably fatigued and frustrated, cross that, in inverted commas, 'Christmas is cancelled', but gathered here in this great house of prayer, built for the single purpose of giving glory to the God who emptied himself of glory in order to know first-hand, in the child of Bethlehem, what it is to be human, I discover a new relationship with God, and therefore a new relationship with everyone.

For this Christ, who was born into poverty, homelessness and exile, and who knew isolation, and faced down fear and distress, is light for the whole world: he teaches the world that we belong to each other; he shows us what our humanity is supposed to be like; he closes the gaps

between us, drawing us closer to God and closer to each other.

Christmas isn't cancelled this year. Our celebrations may be restricted. We might each be carrying a great sadness because we can't be with our loved ones. We are, of course, crying out for an end to the horrors of this pandemic, but we are also filled, as the carol has it, with comfort and joy.

Why? Because God shares our life in Jesus Christ. In him, heaven touches earth. God reaches out to hold us, even though at the moment, we can't hold each other.

So, we are strengthened to face the challenges that lie ahead; we are determined to build a better world where there can be a greater sharing of the world's resources; a greater respect for the earth; and a greater determination to live in peace. Because of what we find at Bethlehem. Because it leads us to God and leads us to each other.

I know there haven't been many jokes in this Christmas sermon. Well, none actually. But that doesn't mean our hearts are not overflowing with joy.

Joy: that God comes to us in Jesus Christ.

Joy: that God holds us and loves us.

Joy: that the whole course of the world is changed by this birth.

Joy: that we are, at last, set free from the corruptions of sin and the finality of death.

Comfort and joy: that whatever we face, and whatever 2021 holds, we will praise the God who out of his great love for us was born of the Virgin Mary and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

This good news unites the world and can build a better future for the world. It is worth celebrating.

So however hard Christmas day is for you this year, however lonely you are feeling, however much you are missing absent family and friends, please rejoice. If you can, crack open a bottle of something lovely. Feast and celebrate. Joy has dawned upon the world.

With the angels let us sing – well, sadly, not here in the Minster, but in our hearts; or maybe in the shower, where I think, on your own, singing is still permitted – raise your voices in defiant praise of all that God has done and against all the misery, horrors, pessimism and injustice of our world. Let's change the world: one praising heart at a time. Glory to God in the highest. Peace to his people on Earth.