



Writing in today's Sunday Express - Archbishop Stephen's article follows in full:

How will you celebrate Christmas?

What are your family traditions?

Gathering around the telly at 3pm is one of ours.

However, for a few fleeting moments next Sunday Christmas may feel a little unfamiliar. For the first time since most of us can remember, we'll turn on the TV for the big Christmas Day speech and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II won't be with us. Someone else will be speaking.

Her son.

Watching his speech will become the new Christmas Day tradition. And in that moment, many of us may well say a quick heartfelt prayer of thanks for her late Majesty's incredible life and example. But then we'll get on with our celebrations - and enjoy hearing what our new King has to say.

In my home city of York, a magnificent statue has been erected in tribute to her late Majesty. I was privileged to stand with King Charles as he unveiled the monument outside York Minster on a rainy afternoon last month.

He spoke tenderly about his beloved mother and the gift and legacy she leaves behind.

"She was always vigilant for the welfare of her people," the King told the crowd; "a constant example of the duty and care for others, and for our community, which is the calling and the duty we all share."

I then offered a prayer of blessing over the statue - grateful for the copious amounts of 'holy water' being supplied by the heavens as I spoke.

Though I'm not sure the crowd were as grateful, mind you!

I've been reflecting on the King's words.

Our Queen was a leader who always dreamed big for the potential of our nation and the Commonwealth she served. And being a woman of such strong Christian faith, it was a Jesus-shaped dream, one built on his foundations of loving service, faithfulness, and compassion. It's why the common theme running through so many of her Christmas Day speeches was the transforming power of love.

Her great muse was of course the Nativity story itself: the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem

It's a story as old as the hills and as fresh as the first flower of spring.

It still has the power to move and inspire in a way that few other stories can.

This is because it is rooted in some of the harshest realities of real life, a world away from the cosy images that are sometimes presented to us at Christmas.

It's a story about a teenage pregnancy and a poll tax summons. A frightened young couple with nowhere to go.

For anyone living in hard circumstances this Christmas, it is a relatable and deeply human story. And we need to hear it now more than ever because we too live in the dark and difficult times of economic hardship and fuel poverty and of a cruel and evil war being waged against Ukraine.

There is no quick fix or easy solutions to any of this, though there is more we should be doing to help the poorest in our society and those who are misplaced because of war, conflict, and oppression.

Yet I remain full of hope.

Like her late Majesty the Queen, I have faith that goodness and light will always overcome the darkness and of the power of love.

I too find great strength and inspiration in the Christmas story. The character I find I'm always drawn to is St Joseph. He can easily get forgotten. But I am inspired by his faithfulness. I can identify with him.

Once Mary said her 'yes' to God, she at least had the very clear evidence of the baby growing inside her. But all Joseph had to go on was a dream. A dream that told him to trust God and not to fear. And, remarkably, that's what he did.

I also reckon that Joseph's response is much closer to how it is for most of us when it comes to faith. We don't have the physical evidence Mary had; but we do have dreams and visions. We have the stories that other people tell us, and we have to decide whether we're going to trust them.

Joseph trusted. Against the odds. He supported Mary. He gave Jesus a home.

Putting my trust in Jesus, inviting him into my life, has changed and transformed me. It has also compelled me to try and change the world for the better.

At Christmas we are all invited to be part of this story and part of this change. It is the time when we are asked to reflect on what we're putting our faith in and what dreams we have for our lives and for the world.

Or to put it very plainly: are we going to make room for Jesus by making room for those who are in great need? Are we going to be led by love?

And of course, another great Christmas tradition is to come to Church to a Carol service, or a Christingle or for Communion at Midnight or on Christmas morning.

This is where we can hear again the joy and challenge of the Christmas story – the story of God with us. You may even discover a Jesus-shaped dream of your own.

God bless you and happy Christmas!

