



THE ARCHBISHOP
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Walking out of Bishopthorpe Palace towards the north of York - if the wind is blowing in the right direction - sometimes the most glorious fragrance fills my nostrils.

Chocolate!

It is the familiar smell of our city's world-renowned Nestle chocolate factory churning out countless numbers of Kit Kats, Aeros and Yorkies. Some of these treats will, hopefully, find their way into our stockings this Christmas.

As chocolate factories go, it's probably second only to Willy Wonka's.

I've always loved Roald Dahl's book, *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, and the films that have been made of the story.

In fact, I love a good story and one of my great pleasures over the festive period is to immerse myself in them.

And not just from the books I'm reading or the films I'm watching. I find great power and meaning in hearing personal stories told by the people I meet and minister to or by my family around the meal table.

Recently I spoke with a Ukrainian family who had fled the war and heard their story. I had lunch in the fantastic *Persian Pomegranate* restaurant in Great Ayton which is run by a lovely Christian couple who fled persecution in Iran many years ago. The food was fabulous, but most moving was when they sat down with me after lunch and told me their story.

As we approach the year's end, I'm also listening to the big and vital story of our whole region, its sorrows and its hopes.

I hear stories of longing for greater prosperity, security, growth and flourishing.

I hear stories of people struggling to make ends meet.

Recent statistics from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (chocolate, it turns out, and those who make it take a lead in all sorts of good things) found that almost a million children across the country are living in destitution- triple that from 2017. It is a grim read and a very, very sad story.

Furthermore, the Trussell Trust are expecting their worst winter ever - providing record numbers of food parcels.

I spoke in the House of Lords recently about how regional devolution could be one positive way of tackling some of our biggest issues and imbalances. I passionately believe that it could renew our regional identity - and give us all hope for the future.

Spiritually speaking we recognise in the Church of England that we can also be doing more regionally to share the good news of the Christian

message. The Faith In The North initiative- recently launched in Dewsbury Minster and inspired by the great northern saint and first bishop of York, St Paulinus – aims to celebrate stories of faith in the North and help renew the missionary purpose of the Church over the coming years.

We hope and pray that this will help propel more of us to step out of our comfort zones - and, yes, sometimes our church buildings - and offer even more loving service and Christ-like hospitality to people in our communities.

This is why the Christmas story is so important to me.

It is why I've dedicated so much of my life to sharing it with as many people as possible.

I am more convinced than ever that the birth of Jesus Christ - Emmanuel, God with us - has the power to stir us to loving action and personal transformation like no other story in history.

It is a story that never wears out or dulls in its retelling.

I find there is always something new to discover in the journey of Mary and Joseph towards Bethlehem, the birth of the Christ child and the encounters with the shepherds and the angels.

Many of us will be singing our hearts out to 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing' today and tomorrow.

It is a rousing carol that hits home how God's heavenly messengers had the ultimate good news story to sing about.

'Hark' literally means to listen. In this context to listen to the message that a Saviour had been born for 'all the people'.

Not just the holy ones, the church-going ones, the wealthy or the powerful ones - but all the people.

That means me. That means you.

Of course, I realise that amidst all the chaos, festivities and all the other noisy clutter of this season, it is becoming harder than ever to listen to the real story of Christmas.

Yet I find when I make time to do that my soul is awakened to the beautiful hope found in the birth of Jesus.

I am touched afresh that he came as light to snuff out all the darkness of our broken world. That he offers peace which transcends our understanding.

So let me encourage you all to 'Hark!' to the message of hope found in Jesus as part of your celebrations.

You can hear the retelling of his birth story in wonderful parish churches across Yorkshire.

Why not take your children - and tea towels - and attend a crib service tomorrow afternoon? Why not light a candle at a midnight mass on Christmas Eve? Or join in the carol singing at a Christmas Day celebration?

I'm looking forward to preaching in York Minster at 11am on Christmas Day. Why not come and join me if you're in the city?

Wherever you end up, I hope and pray that you find joy and peace in abundance this Christmas - and find time to embrace the greatest story ever told.

Then go home for a chocolate or two. Or something stronger. And as you feast remember the stories of those who cannot. And how Christ came to change this



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