

Read Archbishop Justin Welby's Christmas Day sermon preached at Canterbury Cathedral this morning:



Come Holy Spirit and fill our hearts, and set us alight with the flame of your love. Amen.

Well, is Christmas saved? I've seen nothing but headlines over the last few weeks saying 'Can we save Christmas?'

It was a national theme again this year – in fact it became a trending topic in the news from the summer onwards – could Christmas be saved? The saving of Christmas was apparently in the hands of the politicians, the scientists, the lorry drivers, the supermarkets and according to one commentator a couple of weeks back, even that most unlikely hero of current affairs, Peppa pig.

As a nation we have been confronting such difficult things. We have been faced collectively as never before in peacetime with our limits – our fragility, the contingency of life and our mortality. As a nation, perhaps six to seven million people have faced bereavement suffering and loss. We all face uncertainty, uncontrollability and unpredictability, whether we are working in SAGE, to the Cabinet, to each one of us, from huge companies to those sleeping rough. And as a society, too often we have faced these challenges without hearts open to God. There can be no greater aloneness.

Naturally we wanted the time in which we could celebrate without being reminded of all the things that were difficult.

Christmas traditionally has been a time when we have forgotten our limits - especially when we eat, drink, sleep, watch TV, and spend. That might be why we were so set on saving Christmas this year - we wanted some escape.

But let's get this straight – it's not we who save Christmas, it's Christmas that saves us.

That is why the angels sing. In the birth of Jesus, God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. He saves us through this child Jesus – whose name literally means 'Saviour'.

Of course there is much we can do, and as wonderful communities have done – and we have had every cause to be proud of human achievement in science and medicine [the vaccines!] in service and sacrifice [the NHS and the millions of key workers!!] in technology and communications. There is no doubting our human capacity to solve problems and show great kindness. I'm sure the Deputy Lord Lieutenant going around Kent has been inspired over the last year with what volunteers do. There have been the volunteers who have been on my mind, welcoming and caring for refugees arriving on the beaches so close to this cathedral. Those volunteers are extraordinary people, especially the crews of the RNLI. I saw them the other day, just getting on with it - five times as many callouts as they've ever had in the history of the Dover lifeboat, and they do one thing – save life at sea. It's not politics, it's simply humanity. And volunteers today in food banks and other places of comfort and help show this country as it should be, at its best, as we dream of it to be: a beautiful sign of compassion, of generosity, of living out that saying "it's not about me". It's not about me.

But all these things we can do also draw attention to what we can't do. The vaccine is amazing, but ultimately we can't vaccinate our mortality away. Many people have tried to live without these limits – we have tried to overcome the limits of age and mobility, the limits of the things we can't control, the limits which cause difficulty in our lives. We have tried to shield ourselves from how limited each of us is – we've done that often by our limitless use of the natural world. These are actions which have brought the planet into trauma which, despite the initial and vital agreement at COP26, it is still unclear if we can heal. At the heart of all these issues is not economics or politics. It is human sin, selfishness, it's our desire to be in control as a human race, not in God's control. We think we can save everything, even Christmas.

There are things we can't conquer - people are not on an upward trajectory towards perfection. Together and as individuals we daily bear the consequences of selfishness, lack of love and unforgiveness. Look at the comments below an article in the newspapers if you want to see selfishness and unforgiveness. We see that in our own behaviours and in organisations that we just can't find the way to act rightly. We cannot save ourselves. But God can. The gift of salvation that we see in this infant in the manger is not just offered to some people, but to all.

And that is the theme of the song of the angels. The very seams of heaven split, and with cartwheels of delight they announce the news – God has come as saviour and everyone is included.

We live in societies biased towards power, towards exclusion, towards preferring one to another. Our exercise of power has been weighed in the balance and found wanting: it is inadequate to deal with with normal life, let alone crises.

The Christmas story shows us how we must treat those who are unlike us, who have far less than us, who have lived with the devastating limits of war and national tragedy – those who risk everything to arrive on the beaches, who suffer want and poor housing in our own country; our own citizens - little food, endless worry, health injustice, all over this, our country. There was a recent Housing Ombudsman's Report which shocked me, which told of people having 'squalid' living conditions – damp, mould, and lacking basic repairs – due to their landlords' lack of – and I quote exactly - 'empathy and respect'. That is not just a landlord, it is our human and systemic incapacity to give full human dignity to every person. It's what sin looks like, individually and institutionally.

But the love of God is not like that. Within most of us is a desire for better, a desire that is the divine discontent of God at work within us. The divine discontent of the Holy Spirit of God saying: 'we can do better'. It is a desire rooted in God's action of taking human form, reaching the poorest. It is rooted in the Christ child, and the crucified God of Good Friday.

God comes as saviour for us all, so all can be changed and be themselves God's compassion in our world. That is your call and mine – to be God's compassion in our world.

Someone earlier this year asked me how they were supposed to believe Jesus was the saviour when the world was in the state it's in...

It is precisely into the state of how things are that God comes in Jesus, as a baby at Bethlehem.

God, who is by definition without limits, chooses to empty himself and come to us in the limits of this child. He enters into how fragile and risky, unknown and dangerous life is. In Jesus, God experiences with us the deepest set fears, injustices, hardships which we can't control.

This saviour not only suffers with us. He dies instead of us.

Earlier this month a friend told how, when his son was asleep, he and his partner had put up their decorations. When they opened their crib scene they could find Mary and Joseph, the shepherd and Magi, even a sheep and a camel, but they couldn't find the baby Jesus. They hunted everywhere but no joy – they'd lost him. So they left the scene until the morning – everyone in their right place, except no baby in the empty manger.

When my friend came down in the morning he noticed that his son had replaced the baby Jesus in the crib with a crucifix - Jesus hanging on a cross. There were the holy family in the stable gathered round a figure hanging on a cross.

This arresting image has stayed with me – for the baby whose weight was held in that wooden manger became the man whose weight was held by that wooden cross.

Jesus bears all the consequences of our attempts at living without limits - because his love for us is limitless.

God has come to us in all the limits of our humanity. We are not alone. And if that were not enough, he shows us the limitless depth of his love by dying for us – that we might be with him forever.

We gather then this Christmas potentially not imprisoned by our own fragile natures, our vulnerabilities and limits, our sins. We are instead summoned by the angels to gather around the fragile and vulnerable child who comes to each of us to save us. To open our hearts and lives to that child, that man, that God's control of our lives.

Thanks be to God – the saviour of the world is born.

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