

SERMON CHRISTMAS 2020

'Christmas is cancelled' said the British newspaper headlines this week as Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced harsh new lockdown rules due to a surge in Coronavirus cases, and the discovery of a so-called mutant strain of the virus. Each article that possessed this title went on to detail that due to the tier 4 restrictions (the highest form of lockdown) Christmas gatherings would not take place, and shops closed and events cancelled. Now we may think this is a once in history event, but in fact Christmas has been cancelled before in the United Kingdom.

Back in 1647, Christmas was banned in the kingdoms of England which at the time included Wales, Scotland and Ireland and it didn't work out very well. Following a total ban on everything festive, from decorations to gatherings, rebellions broke out across the country. While some activity took the form of hanging holly in defiance, other action was far more radical and went on to have historical consequences.

You see in 1647, parliament had won the civil war in England, Scotland and Ireland and King Charles was held in

captivity at Hampton Court. The Church of England had been abolished and replaced by a Presbyterian system.

You see this new protestant reformation had restructured churches across the British Isles, and holy days, Christmas included, were abolished.

The usual festivities during the 12 days of Christmas (December 25 to January 5) were deemed unacceptable. Shops had to stay open throughout Christmastide, including Christmas Day. Displays of Christmas decorations – holly, ivy and other evergreens – were banned. Other traditions, such as feasting and the celebratory consumption of alcohol, consumed in large quantities then as now, were likewise restricted.

Christmas Day, however, didn't pass quietly. People across England, Scotland and Ireland flouted the rules, which led to riots. Successively in 1647 and 1648, parties led to riots, these riots led to rebellions, which, in turn, caused the Second Civil War that summer. King Charles was put on trial after his defeat in the war and was executed. This resulted in a revolution and Britain and Ireland became a republic – all because of Christmas.

And so if we learn anything from history it is the importance of Christmas. For you see, no matter what the headlines may say, you cannot cancel Christmas. No virus or political and religious restrictions can cancel Christmas, for they do not have the true power to do so. For the idea of Christmas is far more powerful than one may imagine.

For though many around the world cannot gather as they usually do at Christmas, Christmas continues, for it is impossible to stop. Just as it was impossible to stop that small family that made their way to Bethlehem 2000 years ago. No matter what obstacles came across their path that first Christmas; a heavily pregnant woman, no room in the Inn, a vulnerable birth, all these could not stop this Christmas from taking place. For the will of God cannot be stopped, the birthing of God among us cannot be cancelled.

For this year more than any other in recent memory we have had to remind ourselves of that simple truth that God is with us. Not just 2000 years ago in the manger, but with us here and now, in our fear, in our struggles and in the pain of this past year, and what many are experiencing right now around the world. And so what we do on our annual festival of Jesus' birth is not something that remains in the past upon which we can fondly think about, nor is it something that we pull into

the present as some sort of reenactment through a nativity play.

But it is something that we make a continuous reality. This is summed up best in one Greek word which comes from the New Testament, the word *anamnesis*. It comes from Jesus' last supper with his disciples when he says in the Lord's Supper 'Do this in memory of me.' In English the word remember is rather restrictive, only denoting a sort of cerebral recollection. But in the original Greek that word *anamnesis* means so much more. It means not simply a passive process but one by which we can actually enter into the divine mystery. And so as we sing our carols, receive the sacrament and participate in this liturgy, we are bringing about a continuous reality, one that did not stop over 2000 years ago but continues to be ongoing. As the final stanza of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" states, "O holy child of Bethlehem ... be born in us today ... abide with us, our Lord Immanuel."

But this reality is not just restricted to our celebrations today, though uniquely so, for wherever in the world where people gather this Christmas, whether it be here in our churches or a small apartment in a locked down London, the reality that God came to us as a child, to redeem us and to draw us to himself

still lives on. For Christmas will go on year after year no matter what happens. And it is in fact this repetitious nature which is at the heart of the Christmas narrative. For every year we sing the same songs, recite the same words and practice the same ritual. Not because we are out of ideas, but because that is the nature of the story itself.

For as St. Ambrose reminds us that repetition is in fact central to the Christmas story:

“See how divine care adds faith. An angel tells Mary, an angel tells Joseph, and following an angel tells the shepherds. It does not suffice that a messenger is sent once. For every word stands with two or three witnesses.”

And so as we once again stand here this Christmas in this church with all the familiar trappings of this festival we find ourselves called to continue the telling of this story to all who will listen, for we cannot do anything else. The Good news is so great that no natural disaster, virus or otherwise can stop us. The lowliness of the shepherds did not stop them shouting hallelujah, the distance of the wise men did not stop them bringing gifts, and even the might of imperial power could not snuff this life out. And so if there is anything this Christmas that we might hold to you, it is that simple fact, that God came to us in all the vulnerability of a child, so that in our

vulnerability he might give us hope that when all looks dark, there is a light, the true light, which enlightens everyone, which comes into the world.

Christmas cancelled? I think not. Hopelessness, despair and grief on the other hand, God cancels you.

Amen.