

## The Strangeness of Christmas

It will be a strange Christmas.  
It will be a strange Christmas  
without granny at home.  
It will be a strange Christmas with no carol singing.  
It will be a strange Christmas  
without the works Christmas party.  
It will be a strange Christmas.

But there have been strange Christmases before.

In 1647 the Long Parliament under Oliver Cromwell abolished the feast of Christmas. It banned special services, insisted that shops remained open on 25 December and continued to sit in the House of Commons. Historians suggest that the main impact of the ban was to halt religious observance of Christmas in churches, while the secular festivities continued at home, with the occasional outburst of rebellious carolling.

Throughout the Second World War Christmas festivities were constrained by rationing, although extra sweet rations were provided for children and those over 70. But imagine worshipping here, after the Bristol Blitz, with half the windows blown out, a strange Christmas!

But surely the first Christmas was the strangest of all, when God broke into the world he had created and came among us in human form. Into darkness came the Light of the World. Into silence came the Word of God. Into a world of sin came Salvation, Jesus, the One who Saves.

Into the relationship at the heart of the Trinity comes the one who would give up everything for us, whose life will culminate in his sacrifice for us. The one whose life and death are a plea for our future, a plea for our restoration, a plea for our salvation.

This is God's extraordinary gift to us, his very self embodied, enfleshed, incarnated in this tiny child.

All the panoply that surrounds that birth in our imaginations: the star, the angels, the heavenly music, the shepherds and kings cannot compare to the awesome truth that God is revealed in Jesus to us tonight.

This child is the ultimate sign of God's involvement in Creation;  
this child symbolises God's love in creating us,  
so that we might glorify him and enjoy him for ever.  
Those words from the Westminster Catechism,  
published in 1647,  
are the fruit of those same Protestant Reformers  
who abolished Christmas.  
Except of course, they didn't abolish Christmas,  
any more than Covid 19 could cancel Christmas,  
because at the heart of Christmas  
is the strange, mysterious, awesome reality  
of God's breaking into Creation,  
as true today as it was two thousand years ago.

For some this will be a *hard* Christmas.  
For those who have lost their work  
or livelihoods this year;  
For those who have lost a loved one  
and not had a proper funeral;  
For those who are still homeless,  
suffering from domestic violence,  
or unable to access mental health support,  
for all who will find themselves unexpectedly alone,  
it will be a *hard* Christmas.

But Jesus would not find that strange.  
How could someone  
who was born in an outhouse,  
visited by farm labourers,  
who fled persecution  
and lived under alien occupation,  
find suffering strange?  
He knew how it felt  
and his heart was filled with compassion  
for his sisters and brothers,  
longing to lift the burden from their shoulders  
and to give them rest.

Others found it strange,  
that this teacher and healer  
would hang out with the poorest among the  
community, would associate with prostitutes and  
tax collectors,  
when he was clearly someone special.

And perhaps the poor found it strange  
that their friend seemed equally at home  
with Roman soldiers, Priests and Pharisees,  
the people who they feared and hated.

Jesus was not a stranger among us,  
yet he makes the world seem strange to us,  
by turning it up side down,  
and never more so than at Christmas.

Yes, Christmas is strange,  
and this is one of the stranger ones,  
but this Christmas is a good Christmas  
Because this year, as every year,  
God comes to us in Jesus,  
as *our* plea, *his* gift, *our* sign.

Those words come from one of Christina Rossetti's  
Christmas poems – Love Came Down at Christmas.  
You will hear the choir sing the words  
during Communion.  
They are a reminder that while,  
on this night particularly,  
we celebrate the incarnation,  
the gift of Godself in Jesus,  
this gift was part of a bigger plan.

That plan is the good gift to us in a year when we  
have seen and experienced so much suffering,  
and we have been more than ever aware of the  
frailty and failings of human life.  
Jesus shows us in his life  
and in his suffering and death,  
that even God is not immune from those things,  
that he chose to share in them with us,  
so that he could transform them.

This is the sign of a good Christmas  
the sign of God's compassionate love for Creation  
and for us,  
that he was willing to share our life and our death,  
and then, strangest of all,  
to restore new life to us through his sacrifice.

That sacrifice lies at the heart of the Trinity, in the  
relationship of love  
between Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
and the way in which we are drawn into that love  
through the prayer, the intercession, the plea  
of Jesus.

Tonight, our prayers are joined with his,  
As we pray for a good Christmas  
as we pray for the whole of Creation,  
fragile and vulnerable,  
remembering God's promise  
of restoration and hope.  
Because it will be a good Christmas  
let us glorify God in our hearts,  
entering deeply into the strange mystery  
of his presence with us,  
and enjoy him,  
with a heightened sense that our joy  
does not stop with ourselves,  
or those nearest to us,  
but overflows to bring comfort and joy to others.