



Reflection for the Annual Carol Service

Cardiff Cathedral

Sunday 20th December 2020

Archbishop George Stack

Although many people are stressing about not being able to celebrate Christmas properly because of the restrictions, it is important to remember that this is not the first time in this country that Christmas has either been ‘threatened’ ‘forbidden’ or even ‘abolished’. After the execution of King Charles I on 30 January 1649, the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell decreed that the celebrations surrounding Christmas were frivolous and excessive. They didn’t just stop the eating and drinking and dancing. Even the churches suffered restricted numbers attending. Samuel Pepys wasn’t the only famous diarist during that time. John Evelyn was just as accomplished, and his diaries are a revelation too. On Christmas Day 1657, he describes how he went to church to receive Holy Communion. He wrote *“The chapel was surrounded by soldiers. Men of high flight and above ordinances, who spake spiteful things of Our Lord’s Nativity. As we went up to receive the sacrament, these miscreants held their muskets against us as if they would have shot us at the altar”*. I hope there won’t be any shootings in St. David’s Cathedral tonight!

In the end, the Puritans didn’t manage to abolish Christmas. They were wrong to try, of course, and probably had no chance. But on one point they were right. They realized that you can’t separate festivity from worship, the pagan side

from the Christian, or the worldly from the religious. Christmas is all of these – or nothing.

As this turmoil-ridden year draws to a close, the traditional celebration of Christmas is still in question. How many people will be able to go to church? How big can family gatherings be? Are we allowed to travel? No pubs. No parties. Is it true that even the wrapping paper on presents may carry the dreaded virus?

Whatever we are allowed, or not allowed, to do in the coming days we can surely learn lessons about what is important in life. The great symbols of Christmas teach us many of these lessons. The manger is the throne of heaven. Eternity in a moment. The shepherds, social outcasts, are the first who worship. Eternity in the unlikely. Wise men from afar. Foreigners and alien searchers. Eternity now, for everyone.

But all of them experience the vision for just a moment. They cannot stay. They have to go back to their ordinary lives. Mary and Joseph return to Nazareth. The shepherds go back to their flocks. The wise men escape Herod and go home by a different route. As the poet Edwin Muir wrote:

*Reality or vision, this we have seen,
If it had lasted but a moment
It might have held for ever! But the world
Rolled back into its place, and we are here,
And all that radiant kingdom lies forlorn.*

“And we are here”. Gathered together to experience the sights and sounds and faith and hope that Christmas brings. Jesus was born into a world filled with its own turmoil and confusion – just like us. He immersed himself in the human condition “*becoming like us in all things but sin*”. He paid the ultimate price of love in his death on the cross for our salvation. If we can recognise Him as God hanging on the wood of the cross – with all that means – we can kneel before the wood of the crib and sing: O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord. Unfortunately, our excellent choir didn’t sing my favourite carol this evening. It is “In the bleak midwinter, long ago”. The final verse is beautiful.

*What can I give him, poor that I am.
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.
What can I give him? I will give my heart.*

In the midst of all the turmoil, and the sadness at not being with loved ones, all the restrictions we are experiencing, the only thing still worth giving and receiving to and from others is the gift symbolised by the heart and all that this means.
