

## **Bishop of St Albans Christmas Sermon 2011**

Christmas is a wonderful time of year - a time of celebration, a time of peace on earth and goodwill. Though quite what the talking reindeer and singing Christmas tree in the shopping centre have to do with it I fail to know. Sometimes it's hard to believe that beneath all the razzmatazz is a festival commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ.

Whether or not you share my frustration and joy, Christmas at least gives us all a chance to draw breath, and catch up with friends and family. But it also gives us an opportunity to reflect on what has been a difficult year for our nation.

- In August we witnessed riots in many of our towns and cities.
- Occupy camps pitched outside St Paul's and three other cathedrals have provoked a national debate about wealth and poverty.
- Our newspapers overflow with doom and gloom about the financial crisis facing Europe.
- Nearer to home, some feel that they have little to celebrate this Christmas – not least the four people I have met recently who have lost their jobs.

How can we echo the angels' song of peace and goodwill when everyone says we are in crisis? How do we celebrate when so many appear to have lost sight of looking after their neighbour and instead seem to be out for themselves?

Well, these are not new questions. Similar challenges confronted the people of Israel in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before the birth of Jesus Christ – the passage with which our first lesson from Isaiah 62 deals. It is generally agreed that these closing chapters of Isaiah were written to the people of Israel who were living in exile in Babylon.

If you ever go to Israel, you may visit the excavations at Tirsah, in Nablus on the West Bank. Archaeologists tell us that when they excavated the levels from the tenth century BC they found that the houses were all basically the same – both in their design and in their size. It was a tenth century version of Welwyn Garden City. Whatever their wealth, background or occupation, families lived side by side.

Contrast the houses dating from the eighth century BC - 200 years later – that they also excavated. The community had divided. There is a group of larger, sturdier houses in one area, but in another area there is a number of much poorer houses huddled together. This polarisation in Israelite society exercised the minds of the prophets, most notably Amos and the school of Isaiah. They spoke powerfully about our mutual responsibility towards one another and to God's world. They did not criticise wealth creation. What they were fiercely critical of were those who did not see that greater wealth brought with it increased responsibility to think about how we share the fruits of our labours and how we need to work for the common good.

Then in 587 BC everything fell apart. King Nebuchadrezzar and his Babylonian army surrounded and conquered Jerusalem. The leaders of Israel were deported to Babylon and held in captivity for 50 years. When the exiles were eventually allowed to return home they discovered that the temple in Jerusalem had been desecrated and much of the country ravaged. They returned as a poor dispirited group, with only a distant memory of a golden age when God had been leading them as a nation. You can imagine them trying to make sense of why God had allowed this to happen.

And it was into this uncertain situation that the prophet Isaiah spoke about the pressing need to “rebuild the city”:

<sup>10</sup>*Go through the gates, prepare the way...; build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples.*

<sup>11</sup>But they are not to “rebuild the city” simply as it was before. They could not and must not go back to the old ways. They needed a new vision of their common life, of working together, where everyone had a valued place and an honoured role. As Isaiah put it:

<sup>12</sup>*They shall be called, ‘The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord’;...A City Not Forsaken.’*

In twenty-first century Europe we are in a very different place to that group of battered exiles. Nevertheless many people today feel we are in a mess – not least those involved in the Occupy London protest. I do not agree with some of their tactics or indeed everything they are saying, but they are articulating something which is felt by many across all walks of society. It was extraordinary that on the very day that the media were focussing on their protest, it was announced that the FTSE 100 chief executives had received average increases of 47%. This was this same group who had been preaching about the need for all of us to pull in our belts and share the pain together.

We need to rebuild a sense of corporate responsibility in every part of our nation: in politics, in private, public and voluntary sectors, in our churches and faith communities. The only message we hear from our three main political parties is to “rebuild the city” following the old street plan. They presume that only ever-increasing personal autonomy, consumption and choice will bring happiness and fulfilment. This is manifestly false. We all know – at least with our heads if not our hearts – that those of us in Western Europe cannot go on consuming more and more when so much of the world has so little, yet we keep doing it just the same.

Sadly there is no new narrative from our political masters, no vision other than *homo economicus* – the desire to get back onto the same old bandwagon that has careered into the ditch. I do not wish to decry those benefits that our political and economic system has brought. But I want to make a plea that it be accompanied by a new moral vision of what we do with our wealth and how we ensure that everyone has a fair share in it.

And this is where the events of Christmas, with the proclamation of the God who comes among us, are transformative. The real Christmas story is not a tinsel and fairy lights narrative, but one shot through with dark threads. It speaks of a God who in Jesus Christ is born among us in powerlessness and vulnerability.

For centuries this narrative has acted as a prophetic word to our nation, helping us envision what God’s world could be like, if only we would kneel at his manger. And it can still reshape our values and fire us to seek after the common good. The Christ child summons us to a new and better way of living.

May I finish with sharing with you a personal story? A few years ago I was helping out at a centre for the homeless at Christmas. I found myself working alongside a young volunteer, who I discovered was a lawyer. As we stood side by side washing up the dirty plates he told me that he came from a modest background but was now in the early years of a promising legal career. Yet he felt troubled. Was there nothing more to life than living in his own successful, comfortable world? What about the disparities in the community in which he lived?

As a result he had begun to search and it led him to embark on a journey of faith. There was no great flash of light, no Damascus Road conversion. He told me that in spite of his intellectual battles, he had become convinced that in the Christmas story God had revealed himself in a unique way. And this had led him to offer himself to God. And here he was, two years later, peeling potatoes and washing plates in his spare time. Not only that, I discovered that half a day a fortnight he gave free legal advice to the marginalised and poor. As we stacked the dishes he confided, 'I think that is what Christmas is really about.'

So may God bless us all with his grace this Christmas, that we may be people of generosity. Amen.