

Along the track

And so...

In the words of John Lennon:

And so this is Christmas,
And what have you done,
another year over
A new one just begun.

Another year over.... and what a year!

What will a Covid normal Christmas be like? Christmas is usually a wonderful time for most people, time with family and friends, gift giving and receiving, a break from work, the start of summer holidays for many. But for those moving out of lockdown, it will be a time of very mixed emotions, joy and apprehension, companionship and sadness for who can't yet join us or for lost ones whose passing has gone unsung. The Virus has changed even the most basic things, even the way we gather.

Christmas is a time of celebration and reconnection, not just with people but with this story and the timeless message it brings to every age and place.

This back-to-the-basics story about a baby born in a dirty cowshed without doctors or pain relief or hand sanitisers offers a powerful reminder of what is important in life. It is a story of poverty and powerlessness, about a family totally dependent on the kindness of others. Yet all over the world in all sorts of places, from freezing snow to blistering heat, all sorts of people in all sorts of languages sing about that event. It reminds us once again of the power and importance of love in its many forms and the joy it can bring, the gift of family and friendship, the importance of kindness, of giving and being gracious in receiving, the gift of being safe and secure. Christmas reminds us too of those who, in hard times, deserve to be treated with extra dignity and respect, with compassion. It is a reminder that for so many people, the homeless and hungry, the refugee and the prisoner, lockdown is still with them.

How will we prepare for Christmas? How will we celebrate it? Will it be all glitter and glam or will Christmas help each of us to reflect on this year with its, anxieties and challenges but also, in the middle of all that, its joys and blessings. Lennon poses a very good question- what have you done this year? What will I bring from my life journey this year to offer at this time? The Magi visited with gifts full of deep symbolism. All gifts are symbols, not the least our love and affection, gratitude and our desire to bring joy and happiness. Whether we have had a great year or a tough one, whatever we bring is welcome. What will our gift symbolise after this extraordinary year? Might we invite a stranger to our table or make a donation to the poor on each other's behalf or avoid giving each other gifts that use up unnecessary resources?

There are those who are alone, those estranged from family, the homeless, or those who may be ill who may not find it a time for joy and celebration. Either will those who are for whatever reason angry or disaffected with the Christian religion. Will we simply dismiss them from our thoughts or ask ourselves what we might do for them this Christmas, what we might show them in and by our actions?

This simple, timeless story of a poor family in difficult times is a stark reminder of the injustices of the world that they lived in and the injustices of the world we too live in. It is also a reminder of the spiritual emptiness of modern times. So many react to this season so full of mystery, joy and wonder with indifference, cynicism and at times ridicule and hostility. Perhaps we might be better to learn to take **Ebenezer Scrooge to heart: "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year."***

Christmas celebrations can help us grasp something of how deeply we are loved by God. We feel that in the love of our parents, our partner, our children, our brothers and sisters, we feel that love in our celebrations, in all those moments of joy, happiness and wonder in our life. We can feel it too in the most menial and ordinary, the everyday greetings and acts of kindness - in all these we are experiencing being loved by God.

A Christmas prayer:

Jesus, as I prepare to celebrate Christmas this year, I bring to you my family, my relatives, my neighbours, my friends and the people with whom I will spend Christmas day.

As I look at their faces and treasure their stories. I ask you to bless them with your love and grace and keep them safe.

I pray especially for those who are unable to be here with us this year. I pray that Your peace may be with them and that, in some way, they may feel the joy of Your presence and our love for them wherever they may be.

May God always be near to you and yours and you near to God.

* Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Regards
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