

Sermon for Christmas Day 2017

The Right Reverend June Osborne, Bishop of Llandaff

The range of Christmas merchandise which bemuses me is that which says 'Baby's first Christmas'. The one Christmas which no child appreciates or remembers is that very first, so having a bib or baby-grow which proclaims, 'Baby's first Christmas' is really about the excitement others in the family feel about having the beautiful gift of a new-born. It's a celebration of Christmases to come and if you have a new baby in the family this year enjoy it for all its worth.

Well, as many of you know this is my first Christmas as Bishop of the wonderful Diocese of Llandaff. I feel I should have a bib which says 'Bishop's first Christmas'. I'm delighting in being in this part of South Wales. Delighting particularly in all that our churches are offering to their communities this Christmas. Some have formed a night shelter rota to offer refuge off the streets for the homeless. Some are reaching out to offer security to refugees. Some are putting on adult nativity plays 'Christmas: the Story' to remind those who've forgotten of the coming of Jesus Christ to Bethlehem. There're Christingles and Carol Services and like we do here on this Christmas morning, the worship of Almighty God: Hollalluog Dduw as I've been learning to say this autumn.

For my family our relocation to Llandaff has meant leaving behind some Christmas traditions and events but many have travelled with us. Two of them collided on my last shopping trip on Saturday. In the run-up to Christmas my husband Paul and I have an 'embargo' period when we're not allowed to buy anything for ourselves lest the other one has already bought it as a present. There's a bit of dispute about when the embargo period begins but it's roughly around the beginning of November and it doesn't end until presents are opened later today. But another tradition is that I usually read a crime novel for relaxation after Christmas Day has come and gone. Not trusting entirely to Santa's choice of reading matter this year I bought myself an Anne Cleeve's murder mystery on Saturday having heard a radio interview with her. I was promptly told off for breaking the embargo period. I'm unrepentant!

I'm not the only person who'll enjoy a crime novel this Christmas. It feels as if their popularity continues to increase as the world we actually experience becomes ever more confusing. Perhaps that's because it's a piece of satisfying

escapism. In that interview Anne Cleaves suggested that when the things of our world are unresolvable and cannot be tidied or made to feel safe we immerse ourselves in a tale where events start confused but then reach at least some resolution. In the books I read there's usually a tragic, shocking crime which begins by making no sense. Neither we nor the detective can understand what has happened or the motivations which lie behind it. We begin not knowing who's responsible but slowly, clue by clue, conversation by conversation we're led to a place of resolve.

Perhaps all of us need a good crime novel in our stocking because the year coming to an end has been described to me by many as 'confusing'. Just think back for a second to last Christmas.

We started 2017 with a Prime Minister with no expectation or necessity to face a General Election and a Welsh Assembly feeling wholly at ease with itself. There was as yet no Article 50 and no President Trump in the White House. There was still devolved government in Northern Ireland and Robert Mugabe interminably President of Zimbabwe. Catalonia and Las Vegas were thought of as settled tourist destinations and high-rise tower blocks were thought of as safe solutions to the growing demand for housing in cities. Concerts were a great night out and you didn't have security queues to get into rugby matches at the Principality Stadium. We still had banks operating in most of our smaller communities. Young people by and large didn't vote, and sexual harassment was thought to be rare and to be suffered in silence. Yes, there were places where greed, ignorance and hatred led to the misery and cruelty of war but that only marginally penetrated our thinking.

And what about your 2017? Whatever's happened in your life in 2017 you'll almost certainly know those for whom this Christmas feels deeply confused. They're having to deal with things they hoped never to have to deal with, and to find courage and a spiritual compass to guide them through.

Well, we can't put our hope in escapism, the equivalent of my crime novel: stories which seek to tidy up and resolve the human story. Playing it safe, shutting out the harsh realities, closing in on ourselves with the help of avoidance, pretence or simple self-absorption only makes matters even more confusing.

Instead we're invited to hear what angels are singing about. Llandaff's Cathedral has been built full of angels, and today messengers from God are in

the air, those who sing for joy about something so much bigger than the world's confusion.

In Jesus Christ here is God entering our human experience.

- Here's the divine within our confusion, disclosing to us the power of love, showing us the true nature of God who is all holy and yet part of our lives.
- Here is God our Creator and yet He's humanised, and on our side.
- Here is changed the hopeless human experience to give us meaning.
- Here's the joy of knowing that when the world is dark, cruel and violent – simply incomprehensible - what survives of us isn't the horror but our astonishing ability to explore and protect truth, to create and capture beauty, to live lives of surpassing courage, dedication and compassion.

Before we return to our family traditions and festivities we're asked to put our confusion into this context, that God is with us in it all. In all that hurts or bewilders or threatens you he is in gentle and loving pursuit of you. He comes to Bethlehem, then as now a twisted place of conflict, not with easy answers but with the only form of lasting authenticity which is love.

Which is why the best and only true response to our confusion is our connection with one another. Surely the most alarming trend in our communities this year has been that of social isolation. The loneliness of people. The refusal to share of ourselves and our time. We once prided ourselves on the quality of and support within our communities. Instead we now pride ourselves on individual achievements and leave our neighbours to be crushed by their sense of being alone in the world.

Each of us is given the gift of a new-born today. God comes to us as a new-born and with him comes that sense of what makes life worthwhile, the wonder of hope. If your life is missing that joy, try doing more for others this coming year. Living properly with others is the nearest we can get to heaven on earth. Living better together will take most of the anxiety out of our uncertainties and confusions. We only need to connect with one another. Because God's plan for the salvation of the world started with Him connecting with us.

May I wish you a blessed Christmas and encourage you to make 2018 a year when we better connect.

