



CNI

Church leaders' Christmas messages

The Archbishops of Armagh, The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Bishop of Derry & Raphoe and The Bishops of Clogher

The Archbishops of Armagh

“God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” 1 John 4:9

Together we wish you all a very happy and blessed Christmas, and God’s richest blessings in the year that lies ahead.

The world at the end of 2016 seems a very different place than it did at this time last year. People speak of a profound and pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity all around us. Many are now finding themselves asking questions about their identity in a new and bewildered way.

Is our deepest identity to be found in the local setting, or in a wider context? How local a setting, and how much wider a context?

From a Christian perspective, our fullest identity is found in our being children of God, an identity we share with everyone on this planet. This is the central message of the Gospel and it is presented with a supreme clarity in the Christmas story. God comes among us in the person of Jesus Christ, not as an outsider but as fully human and with a perfect love for all humankind.

The story of Christmas is, however, the story of someone who does not fit easily into neat categories. Jesus Christ became, for a time, a migrant child. He and his family fled to a foreign country because their lives were at risk. The plight of so many hundreds of thousands of displaced people in the world today gives us all cause for thought. If our concern with our own identity allows us to think of others as less worthy of God's love or less in his heart of love than are we, then we are both deluded and dangerous. But Christmas, with its message of joy and hope, is a celebration of the real identity we all share in the love of Jesus Christ for us.

Let us bring that joy and hope into our Christmas festivities and into the coming year.

+Richard Church of Ireland Archbishop of
Armagh +Eamon Roman Catholic
Archbishop of Armagh

The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland

This year the seasons appear to have merged. Not too long ago winters seemed to be more or less as they used to be, cold and icy. Summers were sunny, if not hot – even in Ireland. Spring was a time when what had lain dormant since autumn would begin to wake, bud, blossom and bloom. There was a distinct visible rhythm to the year, which is not as discernable now as it once was.

There is, however, an assured rhythm to the church year when we celebrate Passiontide, Easter, Pentecost, Harvest, and then Advent, which leads to Christmas itself and the hope that was found lying in a manger.

In a lecture last month, I contrasted the difference between optimism and hope by paraphrasing the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann: Optimism is the unfolding of what is already here and what is likely to happen in the future. Hope, on the other hand, has to do with good things in the future that come from 'outside', from God. The future associated with hope is a gift of something new.

It was such a gift that the Angel of the Lord proclaimed to the shepherds that first Christmas night. Returning to the fields through the streets of Bethlehem "...they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them" (Luke 2:17-18). They couldn't keep silent, glorifying and praising God "...for all the things they had heard and seen" (v20).

As the Apostle Peter later wrote, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Those ragged, joyful men did just that.

This year, during the recent presidential campaign in the United States, voters were faced with claims and counterclaims, as feelings were presented as facts that went beyond truth in our Post-Truth society. ‘Fact-Checking’, the need to investigate what we are being told in order to verify what is right and wrong – a recent phenomenon that is also on the rise in Ireland and the UK – has become a sad, but necessary development in public life.

Peter faced gospel critics and unbelievers without the need of ‘Fact-Checking’ when he wrote in his second Letter, “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16). He was a literal witness and we have his personal testimony. I too am a witness to the grace and power of the Lord Jesus in my life.

While the true meaning of Christmas is often overlooked through the merging of the seasons in our Post-Truth world, it is my prayer that you will discover the Saviour who was born, lived, died and was raised again at the centre of this hope-filled story.

At this special time, I wish you a very happy Christmas, and in the words of the Apostle Paul, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

Rt. Rev. Dr. Frank Sellar

Bishop of Derry & Raphoe

Christmas is a time for generosity and goodwill. This season can draw the best out of all of us. In Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol even the grumpy and self-centred miser, Ebenezer Scrooge, discovered that great joy and delight could flow from sharing good things with others at Christmas.

The moment when gifts are exchanged on Christmas morning, with all the excitement and expectation that that entails, is a central part of the day. Often much thought and effort – not to mention cost – have gone into choosing the right gift, and we discover that it can be more blessed to give than to receive.

It’s two thousand years since the first Christmas gifts were exchanged. In Matthew’s Gospel, we

read how the Magi followed a star that led them to the Saviour's birthplace. When they found the baby Jesus, they were overjoyed. They bowed down and worshipped him. And they presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Recapturing the wonderment that the Magi felt at Christ's birth is central to our candlelit carol singing and our Christmas worship. The Magi were among the first people to recognise that something highly significant had happened in the arrival of this child; a momentous gift had been given by God to humankind. And the Magi responded with worship and generosity.

Years later, Jesus spoke of the gift he wanted to give to all of his followers, not only on one day of the year, but every day: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.' There is remarkable generosity and goodwill in his gift of inner peace and freedom from fear.

There are many in our world who are troubled and who are afraid for all sorts of reasons. We remember them especially at this time of year and we use the opportunity to give generously to

ease their burden. Keep them in your prayers, please.

Yes, the generosity of Christmas presents counts for so much in this season of generosity and goodwill, and yet Christ's presence in our lives matters far, far more. That's the greatest gift that any of us can receive. My hope this Christmas is that, just like the Magi, in finding the baby Jesus we will discover the peace of Christ. His Christmas presence is a life-changer, forever.

When the great biblical scholar Monsignor Ronald Knox was only four years old he was asked by one of his parents what he did when he couldn't sleep at night. He is said to have replied: "I lie awake and think about the past" – an unusual answer for a child.

Ken Good

The Bishops of Clogher

Over the past twelve months we on this island have been invited to think a great deal about the past – or more precisely the past of 100 years ago – a time of revolution and war. It was a time of unprecedented violence in Ireland and in the world and we have every reason to be thankful

that we now no longer resort to violence to settle our differences.

However it is not so very different today in other places. Although there is no world war there are wars all over the world, and empires continue to be built and to collapse in violence. It is not even all that different from 2,000 years ago when the child Jesus came into the world in the stable of Bethlehem. Jesus was born into a violent world, into an Empire founded on violence; and almost immediately that violence threatened him, in the form of King Herod, the servant of the Roman Empire. In the words of the Christmas carol: "So he gave the word to slay, and slew the little childer..."

As then in Bethlehem, so now in Aleppo, Mosul, Cairo... the emperors of the modern world use their servants and the little children are slain. Sometimes, in the face of such darkness, we may wonder how the world holds together at all. For Christians the answer lies with the child in the manger, the Son sent by his Father to be a light that can never be overcome by darkness and to bring into the world a depth of love so great that it can never be overcome by any hatred or violence.

That light and love of the Son abides in the hearts of all of those born by water and the Spirit. Knowing this, we can never lose hope. Nor should we cease to support in prayer and in action all who are suffering the consequences of the violence of this world. May the Christmas season renew within us all the gifts of hope, charity and peace. May we not lie awake thinking about the past, fearful about the present or apprehensive about the future.

Instead may our hearts be touched by the peace of the child Jesus, whose hand closes round Mary's finger and with irresistible tenderness pulls down her love on him. May the tenderness of that love surround you and yours this Christmas.

+John McDowell
Mgr Joseph McGuinness