



Pope Francis delivers his Christmas Message and gives the Urbi et Orbi Blessing from the Hall of Benedictions in St Peter's Basilica.

## **Pope at Urbi et Orbi: Christmas reminds us we are all united as brothers and sisters**

**“To us a child is born, to us a son is given” (Is 9:6). The theme of the Pope’s Christmas message looks at how Jesus was born for everyone, “the ‘Son’ that God has given to the entire human family”**

Pope Francis gave his traditional Christmas message and Blessing Urbi et Orbi (“To the City [of Rome] and the World”), offering words of hope and consolation, saying a birth is always a source of hope, and “this Child, Jesus, was born ‘to us’ ... without any borders, privileges or exclusions.”

He pronounced his message in the Hall of Benediction of St. Peter’s Basilica, the upper area just behind the central loggia where he would usually have delivered his message. The pandemic and safety measures in place led to a decision to avoid the risk of large public gatherings in St. Peter’s Square and hence to broadcast live his message from inside the Basilica.

### **We are all brothers and sisters**

The Pope underscored that thanks to the Christ Child “we can all call one another brothers and sisters” even as we hail from every continent, every language and culture, with our own identities and differences. He said this fundamental reality is something we can all build on to address the monumental challenges we are facing at this moment in history, such as the ecological crisis and serious economic and social imbalances worsened by the coronavirus pandemic.

### **God has made this fraternal unity possible, by giving us his Son Jesus**

The unity we need and seek as brothers and sisters, God has made possible, the Pope said, “by giving us his Son Jesus”, a fraternity that is “grounded in genuine love”, where we can encounter others who are different, feel compassion for their sufferings, and draw near and care for them even if

they “do not belong to my family, my ethnic group or my religion.”

The Pope prayed that the Child of Bethlehem might help us open our hearts to help the vulnerable, the sick, those unemployed and affected by the pandemic, as well as women have suffered domestic violence during the lockdowns. He also called for a spirit of international cooperation starting with health care to ensure all will have access to vaccines and treatment.

### **Pray for the suffering and work for peace**

“In everyone, I see reflected the face of God, and in those who suffer, I see the Lord pleading for my help. I see him in the sick, the poor, the unemployed, the marginalized, the migrant and the refugee.”

Looking at the lights and shadows in our world, the Pope offered his prayers and encouraged all people to offer theirs to remember the many children worldwide who are victims of war, especially in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. He called on courageous efforts to work for peace there and throughout the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, and that the Infant Jesus might heal the wounds of the beloved Syrian people and bring comfort to Iraqis and those working for reconciliation, recalling especially the Yazidis who have suffered greatly.

He prayed that peace may take root in Libya and that Israelis and Palestinians might regain mutual trust to continue dialogue to overcome grievances. He encouraged the Lebanese to keep hope alive and for leaders to work for reforms so that the country can persevere in its vocation of freedom and peaceful coexistence.

Looking at other areas of the world, he prayed that the international community be supported in efforts to continue the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, eastern Ukraine. And in areas where armed conflicts and humanitarian crisis persist, he remembered Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Ethiopia, Mozambique, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Cameroon and for their suffering to finally end.

The Pope remembered the American continent, especially affected by the coronavirus pandemic, and for a calming of tensions in Chile and Venezuela. He recalled the victims of natural disasters, especially in the Philippines and Vietnam. He noted the suffering of the Rohingya people and that they might find respite and hope.

### **Bring hope, comfort, and help**

Despite the great difficulties we are facing, the Pope noted that the Christ child “tells us that pain and evil are not the final word”, and he remembered as examples those who “instead work to bring hope, comfort and help to those who suffer and those who are alone.”

In conclusion, Pope Francis recalled families who are unable to unite today due to the pandemic. He prayed that Christmas might help us rediscover “the family as a cradle of life and faith, a place of acceptance and love, dialogue, forgiveness” and “source of peace for all humanity”.

Wishing all a Merry Christmas.

He then gave his “Urbi et Orbi” Blessing.





## **Pope, Archbishop and Moderator pray for peace in South Sudan in ecumenical Christmas letter**

**Pope Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland Moderator Martin Fair write to political leaders in Sudan**

Your Excellencies,

In this Christmas season, we remember that our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world among the least – in a dusty stable with animals. Later, he called those who wish to be great in his kingdom to be the servant of all (Mark 10:43).

We remain prayerfully mindful of the commitments made at the Vatican in April 2019 – yours to bring your country to a smooth implementation of the Peace Agreement, and ours

to visit South Sudan in due course, as things return to normalcy. We have been glad to see the small progress you have made, but know it is not enough for your people to feel the full effect of peace. When we visit, we long to bear witness to a changed nation, governed by leaders who, in the words of the Holy Father last year, “'hold hands, united . . . as simple citizens' to 'become Fathers (and Mothers) of the Nation”.

We pray, this Christmas, that you will know greater trust among yourselves and a greater generosity of service to your people. We pray you know the peace that surpasses understanding in your own hearts and in the heart of your great nation (Philippians 4:7).

## **Notre-Dame choir sings at historic cathedral for the first time since devastating fire**

**The Notre-Dame cathedral choir has sung inside the gothic landmark for the first time since last year's devastating fire - complete with hard hats and social distancing in place.**

The 20 singers also wore protective suits as they performed without an audience for the Christmas Eve concert.

Members of the public are still not allowed inside the partially-destroyed cathedral which remains a construction site.

People are not expected to be able to go back inside until at least 2024.

The choir performed beneath stained-glass windows for the Paris concert that was recorded last Saturday but broadcast on Christmas Eve.

The singers, who socially-distanced before taking off their masks, were accompanied by acclaimed cellist Gautier Capucon and a soprano soloist.

The diocese called it a "highly symbolic concert... marked with emotion and hope" and a celebration of a "musical heritage that dates to the Middle Ages".

Monsignor Michel Aupetit, the archbishop of Paris, held Thursday's Christmas Eve services in Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois Church across from the Louvre Museum instead of Notre-Dame.

## **Light during the darkness – online event Remembering the Holocaust**

The Linen Hall Library, Belfast, in partnership with Conflict Textiles\* will mark Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January with an online event featuring inputs from a transnational panel of contributors on Holocaust-related family memorabilia. The event will take place over ZOOM from 2.00pm – 3.30pm (GMT).

There will also be a small exhibition from Tuesday 12 January, Light During the Darkness: Remembering the Holocaust, in the Library and online displaying items of a personal nature that survived World War II and have their own fascinating, historic stories to tell.

For more information on Holocaust Memorial Day 2021 visit:  
[ <https://www.hmd.org.uk/> ]

Conflict Textiles is an 'Associated Site' of CAIN (Conflict Archive on the INternet) at Ulster University, Northern Ireland. The collection is mainly comprised of arpilleras, quilts and wall hangings. Making visible the struggle for the disappeared remains at the very core of the collection. For more information visit:

<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflictextiles/>

Please ensure that you include an accurate email address when booking. A link to join the event will be emailed to you on the morning of the 27th January.

The cathedral that collaborated with its local football team for a unique carol service

## **Cathedral and football side create online carol service**

**This year, Bradford Cathedral collaborated with their near neighbours, football side Bradford City, for an online service of readings by players and carols by the Cathedral choir.**

Nicknamed 'the Bantams' because of the similarity of their team colours to the colourful tail plumage of the bird of the same name, Bradford City AFC were formed in 1903, around 16 years before the creation of the Diocese of Bradford thus predating Bradford Cathedral although the building dates back to the 11th century.

Bradford currently play their football in League 2, having enjoyed a two-year spell in the Premier League in the late 90s. The carol service collaboration with the Cathedral is the first of its kind.





## Clayton Donaldson of Bradford City football club

Bradford Cathedral Precentor, Paul Maybury, opened the service with a welcome, followed by a reflection from Bantams Chaplain Oliver Evans, who spoke about the challenges faced in 2020:

“I don’t know if you’re a person today of big faith, little faith or no faith, but my prayer is that you would know God’s kindness; you would know His forgiveness; and you would enjoy his mercy.”

Readings were given by forward Clayton Donaldson (pictured), midfielder Billy Clarke and goalkeeper Richard O’Donnell who is also club captain.

Canon Paul Maybury said: “This service has been an aspiration for some years and, as we are unable to meet in

December 26

the Cathedral, it is wonderful that we are able to put this recording together.”

“May the words and actions of Jesus inspire and guide us to be humble and generous, kind and loving as He was.”



## Opinion - Would the BBC have dared spoof Islam?

**The Goes Wrong Show on BBC 1 the other night pretended to be satirising a badly organised Nativity play. Harmless fun you might say but actually this poor attempt at comedy was mocking the message of Christmas itself - the Incarnation of the one true God in Jesus Christ, Julian Mann writes in Christian Today.**

The real intention of its makers was quite clear in their ridicule of the Annunciation, the account in Luke's Gospel of the Angel Gabriel telling the Virgin Mary that she would

become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to Jesus who 'shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David' (Luke 1v32 - Authorised Version).

Am I calling for this sort of programme to be banned? Certainly not. The cancel culture should not be pandered to, least of all by orthodox Christians. They are the very people most likely to be silenced if the forces of the neo-Marxist totalitarianism behind the cancel culture is allowed to prevail. If there were a commercial broadcaster which thought it could make money out of such blasphemous rubbish as The Goes Wrong Show – The Nativity, then good luck to them.

**But does it not speak volumes about the real viability of such anti-Christian propaganda in Christmas week that it was the licence-fee cocooned State broadcaster that was responsible for it and not a commercial operator?**

The shame I feel about this broadcast, which I did not set out to watch (a member of my family drew my attention to it), arises from the fact that I helped to fund it by paying the BBC licence fee last February. It may have become a truism to point this out given the BBC's blatant anti-Christian bias in the past couple of decades, but does anyone seriously think that the corporation would dream of broadcasting a spoof on an essential tenet of Islam during Ramadan?

Charles Moore, a former editor of The Daily Telegraph and the late Lady Thatcher's biographer, who this year became a member of the House of Lords, has been campaigning to defund the BBC. I imagine that Lord Moore would be disappointed to read newspaper reports that Prime Minister

Boris Johnson has now changed his mind and decided not to decriminalise non-payment of the licence-fee poll tax.

I am reminded of a time in December 2011 when Mr Johnson, then Mayor of London, happened to be present as the singer Annie Lennox performed a version of the beautiful Christmas carol, In the Bleak Midwinter, on the BBC's Andrew Marr Show. Significantly, this performance omitted a vital verse in Christina Rossetti's poem:

'Our God, heaven cannot hold Him

Nor earth sustain,

Heaven and earth shall flee away

When He comes to reign:

In the bleak midwinter

A stable-place sufficed

The Lord God Almighty —

Jesus Christ.'

This clear statement of the truth of the Incarnation would seem to have been too politically incorrect for the BBC to broadcast in 2011. I can only hope that after this latest and more terrible disgrace by the BBC, Lord Moore is able to appeal to Mr Johnson's conscience.

Julian Mann is an evangelical journalist based in Morecambe, Lancashire, and author of Christians in the Community of the Dome.



## News briefs



**Happy birthday to Princess Alexandra** - who turned 84-years-old yesterday. Alexandra was the last royal to have had her birth witnessed by the British Home Secretary in 1936. This was to ensure that she could be verified as a genuine royal and there was no swapping of babies.

**Maintaining a lovely tradition in Bessbrook County Armagh** - "In spite of the awful coronavirus we managed to maintain the lovely old tradition of Carol Singing early this Christmas Day morning through the village streets. This is a tradition lasting well over 100 years and we were determined to maintain it. Two teams of carol singers, (not more than 15 in either group and observing social distancing) brought the Christian message of hope and encouragement to our local community. A big thank you to all those who participated and to the Minister and members of the local Methodist Church who welcomed us at their



service worship. We look forward to happier and safer times and trust that normal service will be resumed next year when we can all meet and celebrate Christmas properly-Bessbrook style! May God bless you and yours this Christmas.”

**Archbishops visit Chaplaincy at QUB** - Archbishop Eamon Martin and Archbishop John McDowell met with Chaplaincy’s Pastoral Manager, Shannon Campbell and QUB postgraduate, Mark McDonnell, to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students.

[youtu.be/H99kYiZrDWQ](https://youtu.be/H99kYiZrDWQ)

**Highlighting the Word** - In the final video of the series for Advent and Christmas 2020, Archbishop Michael Jackson’s theme is ‘Word’ based on the Christmas Gospel, St John 1: 1–14 which is read by Jane Burns from Athy, an ordinand in the Church of Ireland Theological Institute. On a Christmas Day like none in living memory, the Archbishop suggests that: “As we review 2020 and as we take stock, we still have time to look ourselves in the eye and look for God The Word”.

**Cappella Caeciliana were delighted** - to have Wynne Evans join them for their choir Christmas event, in conversation with Noel Thompson. “Huge thanks to Wynne for making our member event a really fun evening, and for all of his exemplary work for singers of many types during these challenging times for the music sector.” Cappella Caeciliana are supporting Tenovus Cancer, a charity of which Wynne is patron. Please consider donating: [ <https://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/cappella> ]

## **The Revs Ron and Janice Elsdon have just celebrated 50 years of marriage – on Zoom!**

Many congratulations to the Revs Ron and Janice Elsdon, who celebrated their golden wedding anniversary with a virtual get-together on December 19!

The clergy couple were married on December 19 1970 at Holy Trinity Church, Platt, Manchester. They moved from Manchester to Dublin 1971, and were members of St Matthew's Parish Church, Irishtown, before coming north to Belfast 1989, and joining Greenisland Parish.

Janice was ordained 1995. She has been curate at Cloughfern (1995-99); then Ahoghill & Portglenone (1999-2002); assistant to Rural Dean of South Belfast; curate at St Bartholomew's, Belfast, to 2013 and on the ministry team at Belfast Cathedral since 2013.

Ron was ordained in 1999, and was curate at Ballymena from 1999-2002, then rector of St Bartholomew's from 2002-2013. He is now retired, and the couple live in Greenisland.

They have two sons Peter and Andrew, who both live in Yorkshire. Peter is married to Sarina and Ron and Janice have one granddaughter, Isabel.

Guests who had attended their wedding in 1970 – including their best man and bridesmaid – joined Ron and Janice for their Covid-safe Golden Wedding Anniversary celebration on Zoom.

## Pointers for prayer

Almighty God, you make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of your Son Jesus Christ. Grant that, as we joyfully receive him as our redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our judge. Amen.

Today we pray for the transformation which Jesus brings. This Christmas, we remember the coming of Jesus to our world, and the promise of hope which that brings with it.

We pray for all for whom the celebration of Christmas is difficult; those who are ill, at home or in hospital, for the bereaved, the lost and the lonely. May they know the light of Christ in their lives at this time.

Today we pray for those facing redundancy this Christmas. This year, record numbers of people were made redundant during lockdowns and waves of the coronavirus, as Government support changed.

Thank God for the support of CMSI links in standing with Maridi Diocese in South Sudan in their aim to provide solar panels for the cathedral compound. This improves lighting in church and also water provision for the community from the new water tank.

As well as those now facing Christmas alone, please spare a thought and prayer today for the many, Health workers, police, clergy and others, who are working Christmas Day, for the benefit of others, and have planned their Christmas bubbles for some other day.

God of shadows and echoes, darkness and light, help us to be still in our dark moments, our waiting times, our

uncertainties. And when morning comes, show us how to greet the dawn without trying to make sense of the amazing light. — Anonymous

## Speaking to the soul

### **What Christmas and the Charlie Brown special is all about**

**by Leslie Scoopmire**

It usually happened every year of my childhood at the end of November or the first week of December. No matter what else was going on in our lives, we kids would demand that nothing interfere with our ability to take part in this cherished ritual. I'm not talking about Black Friday — I'm talking about the Charlie Brown Christmas special, which first aired in 1965.

The opening scene shows Charlie Brown and Linus walking through town and toward a pond to go ice skating with their friends. Charlie Brown suddenly stops and leans against a snow covered wall, which was a common backdrop in the Charlie Brown comic strip for when Charlie Brown would have a philosophical conversation with Linus, always wise beyond his years. Charlie Brown stares out over the wall and says to his friend, "I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess."

And even all these years later, we know that Charlie Brown is not alone, and many of us may find Christmas to be an experience of struggle as much gift.

Over the course of the show, we see that Charlie Brown knows what Christmas is not about: it's not about commercialism, or Christmas decorations, or asking for a bunch of gifts. After Charlie Brown brings home a scraggly pitiful little Christmas tree to be the centerpiece of the play, laughed and mocked by the other kids, Linus steps in to remind everyone what Christmas is really all about.

Standing in the centre of a single spotlight Linus recites from memory the King James version of the gospel we will hear tonight from the second chapter of Luke, in all its simplicity and beauty. Linus then leaves the spotlight, walks over to Charlie Brown, and says "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

We need a gentle insistence. Christmas has become a holiday that begins at Labor Day and occupies 25% of the calendar. It is easy to go all the way through Christmas season forgetting about the miracle that, as our reading from Isaiah reminds us, "a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; And he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

What lies underneath Linus' gentle reminder to Charlie Brown and his friends is that Christmas tells us once again that God is active and engaged in the world. The sending of God's only son to live and heal and teach and care for us as one of us is itself a reminder that God takes the initiative in reaching out to creation. Today's readings reinforce this point. We do not approach God without God approaching us first.



The reading from Isaiah reminds us that God brings about justice and righteousness — this does not depend upon our own human abilities alone but trusts us enough to call for our discipleship in helping to bring it about, just as the incarnation could not have happened without Mary's willingness to be the servant of the Lord. In Isaiah, the required human action comes in seeing: seeing a great light, which also means seeing the world's cruelties and corruption, and yet nonetheless insistently perceiving God at work within this world. Even in the smallest things.

The psalm picks up this thread, observing and noting what God has done and is doing in the world —seeing God's works and blessings, ascribing and naming them specifically as being God's gifts to us, and then being glad—or being grateful—for what God has done. Even more importantly, our Psalm reminds us that worship is over everything else a call to action.

One does not passively worship God by sitting in pews or by singing praise songs, no matter how catchy the tune. That's entertainment. Worship goes beyond that—to carrying the meaning and glory God out into the world and making it visible for all to see in how each Christian live their lives.

God is working in the world. Now, those who expected a great warrior king like the thrilling stories of David with his slingshot are going to be profoundly disappointed with the kind of king Jesus truly is—one who builds up rather than destroys, one who heals rather than wounds, one who comes not to overturn the Law, but to fulfill it, in Jesus's own words. This child who is born to us will grow to be a man who shows us what it is to be fully human—fully made in the image of God. One who will call us out of our own narrow

view to a compassionate, passionate engagement with the world and especially with those who are suffering or oppressed in mind, body, or spirit.

Christmas is about hope. Christmas is about faith—faith in God and in each other. Christmas is about love. Love in action. Love found sleeping in a manger, leading us to the way of life we were meant to live from the beginning.

At the end of the Charlie Brown Christmas show, Linus wraps his special blanket around the poor pitiful little stick pretending to be a tree, and the other kids gather around it and decorate it. When they step back, it has been transformed from a scraggly stick to a beautiful, sparkling tree. the gift of love and care has taken something that was ragged and frail and turned it into a delight and a blessing. Just as Jesus taking on our flesh as a human who is also the son of God transforms us and challenges us to ourselves be a delight and a blessing to all whom we meet: all nations, all races, all creeds, all people.

That's what Christmas is all about.

*The Rev. Leslie Scoopmire is a writer, musician, and a priest in the Diocese of Missouri.*



