

Ely Cathedral

Archbishop Justin Welby's Canterbury Cathedral Christmas Day sermon

This is the text of the sermon preached today (Christmas Day) in Canterbury Cathedral, Kent, England - the mother church of the Anglican Communion.

John 1:1-13

2020 has been for so many the darkness of Covid, of economic crisis, of climate emergency, evils of racism, of war, genocide and persecution. For billions around the world 2020 has been a year walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

It has been a year of anxiety. Anxiety can be reasonable or unreasonable. One of the family when much younger was terrified that a crocodile would climb up the vertical wall of the house to their attic bedroom and eat them. The reasoned arguments that there are no crocodiles in Nuneaton, that crocodiles can't climb walls, all these had no impact. It may have been something to do with seeing Peter Pan on the telly.

Our anxieties are not of that fanciful kind.

They spring from the realities of life, familiar to so many in the world, long forgotten by us. They make a cough, a fever, feeling a bit under the weather, not an inconvenience but a genuine threat.

In this Christmas of absence, mourning and restrictions of all kinds are there any gifts of good news, of hope? There are many. The vaccine is a gift of hope. Our sense of community and mutual care has changed so much. Notwithstanding the politics or recent history, or the sadness or rejoicing of different groups over Brexit, the capacity of governments to find a way forward in relations after Brexit is a Christmas gift.

But above and beyond all these there is the simple history, the reality that the light came into the world and the



Archbishop Justin Welby at Canterbury Cathedral

darkness has not overcome it. Not because we feel it or believe it or it works for us, but because the light of the birth of Jesus reveals God as God is.

Jesus Christ reveals God leaning into the darkness and defeating it through embracing every aspect of our sufferings and struggles, anxieties and fears.

2000 years later, the darkness has still not overcome the light. Empires have come and gone, tyrants have risen and fallen. Economies have emerged and collapsed. Science has offered us obliteration and solutions. Diseases have swept the planet or been eliminated. Wars have threatened human destruction and good people united for peace. Treaties are made and broken.

But the defining event of human history is the coming of the light. As much as we may currently be tempted to imagine this virus as the pivot of our lives – ‘Before Covid and After Covid’ – the pivot for every life, for human history is in fact the coming of the light of Christ.

For all the events of history are judged, are weighed, assessed by this light. It is this light of Christ that is truth and cannot lie. It is this light of Christ that shows the way for a good society, for a good human being, for a good church and at the same time shines hospitably welcoming all to its comfort. It is this light of Christ that offers abundant life that scatters fear and brings hope in a time of Covid, of economic trauma, of war.

It is this light that still shines around the world, that shines today on leaders in South Sudan calling them to embrace its hope and go on making peace. They were appealed to afresh in a letter yesterday from the Pope, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and me. That letter is a step of extraordinary collaboration: it emerges from seeking to follow this light.

It is a light that shines in every place and every heart, believing or not, calling for a better way, a light of judgement in love for every leader, of hope in darkness for every abandoned or agonised human being.

We recognise the light shining in a society that because of our Christian heritage – even if not current belief - thinks it matters fundamentally that the poor are cared for, that the hungry are fed, that the sick have access to the health care they need, that children are educated, that the elderly are cherished and protected.

We see that light in the food banks of Dover, in those helping across every part of Kent, where amidst much struggle people are cared for by local government and by volunteers. We see that light in the hospitals where people offer their life and their future, in the schools looking to the long-term hopes of the next generation. We praise God for that light which has so penetrated this land and so many other lands, the light that calls us back to its source.

The source of that light is God. Not terrifyingly tyrannically demanding, but the self-emptying God who is Jesus the baby in the manger, the wandering preacher who is love and light and freedom, the helpless prisoner on the cross. It is



The Cavehill, Belfast

because darkness cannot conquer that we will celebrate the vacant slab in the empty tomb, the upward looking

The Cavehill, Belfast disciples at the Ascension and the Church empowered by the spirit of God.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Therefore, even at the end of 2020, year of the valley of the shadow of death, we celebrate the light of Jesus Christ – for we are not alone but God has come to our aid. God has shone a light and this light has not been, is not and will not be overcome by the darkness.

Christians must be the witnesses to the hope the light brings us, to the truth it tells, to the correction it demands and the path it defines for our lives.

The light is the light of Jesus Christ and so we do not witness to a moral code but to a person. Jesus comes vulnerably yet overwhelmingly, willing to be disregarded yet utterly compelling. John begins his gospel of witness saying that this light from above is a person in whom we are called to believe and whose light we must follow.

We share the light in our witness not as a duty but in love with the suffering. We share it while weeping for the dying and with the bereaved. We share the light in anger against cruelty and injustice, we testify to the light of Christ to the despairing in deep compassion and sensitivity.

Like the baby in the manger we neither compel nor manipulate, but our witness is always packaged in God's endless and fathomless love, the love that sheds the true light that is never overcome.

Belfast pastor's 'miraculous' recovery from virus to become a Netflix movie

The story of a north Belfast pastor who says he made a miraculous recovery from Covid is to be adapted into a feature film for Netflix, Gillian Halliday writes in the Belfast Telegraph.

Lee McClelland of The Ark Church was left fighting for his life in intensive care after contracting the virus in March.

Following his recovery, Mr McClelland made a video

recounting his experience alone in a hospital bed when a cleaner stood at his door and prayed for him. That same night his condition began to improve.

The video has since gone viral, racking up around half-a-million views on YouTube, as well as being circulated on social media and being



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picked up by Christian publications and television stations globally.

DeVon Franklin, the Hollywood producer of several Christian films, saw the video and contacted the preacher about turning his story into a feature-length production, the Sunday Times reported.

Mr Franklin is best known for Miracles From Heaven, which starred Queen Latifah and Jennifer Garner and is based on the memoir of a woman who claims her daughter was cured of a terminal illness.

He also produced Breakthrough, which made more than \$50m (£37m) at the box office. The film, which could be



Storm Bella beating up Portstewart

available to stream on Netflix by next Christmas, will focus on Pastor McClelland's experience with coronavirus, his church and the viral video in which he recalled his encounter with the hospital cleaner.

No title for the production has yet been released, although the screenplay is to be written by Randy Brown, who penned the script for *Miracles From Heaven* and *Trouble With The Curve*, a 2012 film starring Clint Eastwood.

The movie, which had broadly good reviews from the critics, went on to gross \$49m (£36m) worldwide.

In the video, McClelland said: “When no one else could get in, God sent a cleaner.”

He also explained in the video that, as he started to feel better, he had a craving for crisps and a soft drink.

“I asked the Lord, because nobody could get to me, is it possible you could get me a packet of prawn cocktail crisps and a tin of Coke,” he said.

“The next morning the cleaner came and he brought in a bag, and in that bag were two oranges, a tin of Coke and packet of prawn cocktail crisps, Tayto.”

The pastor, who did not identify the cleaner in the video, said the man told him he had been a missionary in Nigeria for 14 years.

“Thank you to that cleaner, you know who you are if you ever see this, thank you for hearing the voice of God and reaching someone like me, who needed a touch,” he added.

Last week the pastor revealed that he did know the name of the cleaner, but said he wanted to remain anonymous, the Sunday Times reported.

He also claimed he had experienced “a miracle”, as he has no lingering health issues as a result of the virus.

He said he had agreed to the film being made because he felt the producer was “genuine” and would “put across the point and the purpose and the content of the miracle, and all that happened”.

“It'll be a story of hope in the midst of chaos,” he added.

More than 700 children contact Childline on Christmas Day

Children reported issues with domestic violence, alcohol and family tensions

More than 700 children contacted the support service Childline on Christmas Day, a small decrease on the same day last year, Jack Power reports in The Irish Times.

723 children contacted the 24-hour support line over Christmas Day and the early hours of St Stephen's Day.

The phone line, operated by the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC), was run by 35 volunteers on Christmas Day.

Some of the issues the listening service reported children disclosing included family tensions, mental health

difficulties, feelings of isolation, domestic violence, and the impact of family members consuming excessive alcohol.

Childline answered 615 calls and online messages from children on December 25th, and 105 contacts between midnight and 6am on St Stephen's Day.

Last year the charity responded to 793 calls, texts and online messages from young people on Christmas Day, and 1,267 contacts on the same day in 2018.

Overall this year the support line has seen a significant surge in contacts during periods of Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions, with demand up across all services.

John Church, ISPCC chief executive, said “never before has a year presented so many challenges to so many children.”

“They have borne the brunt of huge upheaval, with extended school closures, separation from their grandparents and other loved ones and more. In many cases, there has been



anxiety at every turn – and they have picked up on this,” he said.

Mr Church said it was clear from the number of children contacting the charity’s support service on Friday that the magic of the Christmas season “does not reach every child”.

“For some, what ought to have been the most joyful of times can be the most frightening. Tensions are heightened and children were left feeling lonely, upset and afraid,” he said.

The organisation was “hugely grateful” to the volunteers who gave up their time to help run the service on Christmas Day, he said.

“It was particularly striking yesterday for our service to hear from children and young people contacting us to thank us for having been there for them this year when they may have felt as though there was nowhere else they could turn,” he said.

Lacklustre’ Christmas television attracts 12m fewer viewers than last year

Christmas Day television audiences fell to a resounding low this year after broadcasters were criticised for airing repeats, with Mrs Brown’s Boys among the prime-time programmes that lost millions of viewers.

The top 10 television specials in 2020 achieved just 46 million overnight views compared with 58 million last year; such dismal viewership figures have not been seen since records began.

The Queen's Speech was the most popular programme this year with 8.1 million views across all stations, but viewership figures for other shows in the top 10 most-watched shows plummeted after the festive schedule was criticised for being packed with repeats and "lacklustre" offerings.

A Christmas special of Mrs Brown's Boys is reportedly commissioned for the next six years, but the audience plunged from 4.6 million viewers in 2019 to 3.8 million on Thursday night.

EastEnders and **Strictly Come Dancing** also lost sizeable chunks of their audiences compared with 2019.

Game shows, once a rarity at Christmas, featured prominently in the top 10 most viewed shows this year with **Blankety Blank**, **The Chase** and **The Wheel** all featuring.



Antrim Parish Church



Andrea Jenkyns, a Tory MP, said the viewership figures showed licence fee payers' money is not being spent efficiently. She told The Sunday Telegraph: "Surely it is time that we ensured value for money and quality control measures be introduced to ensure that the shows broadcast are what people really want.

"Then maybe next year we can tune in for some real quality Christmas television. She added: "I remember as a child we would always look forward to watching Christmas TV. The

BBC schedule would always be full of shows for the whole family.

“But looking at the lacklustre offering this year it is no surprise that the BBC viewing figures are down from last Christmas as people view content elsewhere. We must never forget that the BBC is taxpayer-funded and they are there to serve the British people.”

The Blankety Blank Christmas special managed to draw 5.3 million and was the third most-viewed programme this year. The Strictly Come Dancing Christmas countdown suffered a slump along with other BBC offerings, attracting

4.9 million, down from 5.5 million in 2019. Conversely, 5.4 million viewers tuned into the Call the Midwife Christmas special, a boost from the 5.2 million that watched on Dec 25 last year.



**Cobh
Cathedral**

ITV's best-performing broadcast, Coronation

Street, qualified its 2019 viewership with 4.5 million tuning in, but Emmerdale fell from 4.1 million in 2019 to 3.6 million. Flagship BBC soap EastEnders, once cherished for its festive cliffhangers, also drew in only 3.5 million compared with 5.5 million last year.

Kate Phillips, acting controller of BBC One, said: "BBC One had the most popular show on Christmas Day as audiences escaped to Poplar for the Call the Midwife special. "I'm really proud of the range and quality of programmes we've shown across this special day."

The long read

Has Thomas Becket's treasured 'little book' been found?

More has been written about Thomas Becket, the archbishop hacked to death in Canterbury Cathedral exactly 850 years ago, than any other non-royal English person of the Middle Ages. And yet it seems it's still possible to discover new things about his remarkable life.

Before dawn on 14 October 1164, Thomas Becket found an open gate in the city walls and rode out of Northampton with a servant and two guides, the sound of their horses' hooves masked by high wind and driving rain.

The archbishop was making a run for it after a week on trial in Northampton Castle. The initial charge had been a minor one, but King Henry II had added new and increasingly

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serious accusations, and a verdict of treason was looking likely. Read at -

[[] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-55370722>]

News briefs



“As much as we may currently be tempted to imagine this virus as the pivot of our lives — ‘Before Covid and After

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Covid' — the pivot for every life, for human history is in fact the coming of the light of Christ.”



EBM - A massive thank you to M&S Ballyhackamore - from the East Belfast Mission for their kind donation of toiletries and goodies for the Hosford Homeless hostel Christmas hampers! One colleague even gave 20 Terry's chocolate oranges, as her mother always said Christmas doesn't start until you have had one!

Kilkenny generosity - The people of Kilkenny have demonstrated their generosity in recent weeks, with the Mayor of Kilkenny John Coonan hailing the response to his Christmas Charity Fundraiser.

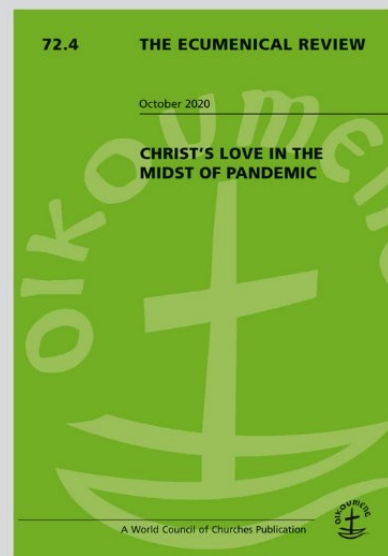
Mayor Coonan has now presented a share of the proceeds of the fundraiser to Kilkenny Lions Club. The balance will be

given separately to ALONE, the charity that supports vulnerable older people to age at home.

In giving support to the Lions Club, the Mayor said he was aware there was a shortfall in normal funding due to the cancellation of a number of charitable fundraising events because of Covid-19 restrictions. The shortfall has been reduced significantly as a result of the mayor's generous support, and this has helped the club provide assistance over Christmas to local organisations, such as St Vincent De Paul, Kilkenny Social Services, Church of Ireland, Good Shepherd Centre and Amber Women's Refuge. Mayor Coonan said he was heartened by the response from the public.

WILEY

An Ecumenical Review Special Issue: Christ's Love in the Midst of Pandemic: Moving the World to Reconciliation and Solidarity



Special issue of The Ecumenical Review - the WCC quarterly, has published a new Special Issue: Christ's Love in the Midst of Pandemic: Moving the World to Reconciliation and Solidarity. It's free to read for a limited time:

[ow.ly/wRzI50CTeEi]

churchnewsireland@gmail.org

Mrs Eileen Warke - Irish Times intimation. WARKE – Eileen C.J.M. (née Skillen), (late of Brabazon House, Sandymount, formerly of Naas, Cork, Dublin and originally Co. Down), December 24th 2020; beloved wife of Rt. Rev. Robert (Roy), much loved mother of Jane and Ruth, adored grandmother of Ben, Matthew, Jack and Alice, great-grandmother of Noah. Loved and remembered always by her family, sons-in-law Jim and Vini, the extended family and her wide circle of friends. In accordance with government guidelines, the funeral will be private. You may view the Service on Monday (Dec 28) at 11.30 am here: <https://youtu.be/5mc2A1JPwnk>. Family flowers only, please. Donations, if desired, to Bishops' Appeal.

St Iberius' Church Webcam access, Sunday, 11.15am:

<https://www.ipcamlive.com/stiberiuschurch>

May we be the first to wish you a Happy New Year!

Join the Archbishop of York as he looks back at 2020 with both thanksgiving and sorrow, and prays that we will all know the peace of Christ in this new year.

What's your New Year's Resolution? In his sermon, the Archbishop challenges our mistreatment of the planet and asks us to treasure the words of peace and comfort and joy, just as Mary did.

Follow the Order of Service at cofe.io/NYEService



Pointers for prayer

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of Joseph & Mary, and the peace of the Christ-child be yours this Christmas and the blessing of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit be with you. Amen

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.

Speaking to the soul

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them.

Luke 2:8-9 NLT

Of all the many surprises in the Christmas story this surely is one of the greatest. We have long since got used to the fact that the birth of Jesus was announced to shepherds, but they were surely the last people who you would have expected to hear about it. They were always last to hear the news. Their work forced them to live away from their communities. But more than that, shepherds were smelly and ritually unclean because of their work. How amazing that God gave them the front seats in the Christmas story!

If we had been given the responsibility of compiling an appropriate guest list to welcome the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, I would guess that shepherds might well have not made an appearance. We would certainly have included the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. If Jesus was their Messiah surely it would be crucial for them to be there? And then we would have thought about him meeting faithful worshippers who had been praying for this moment for years. We could

have come up with a long list quite easily but the idea of including some smelly, ritually unclean shepherds from the fields might well not have occurred to us.

But it did occur to God, and during Jesus' ministry he consistently reached out to people who lived on the margins of society or beyond. The tax collectors, the prostitutes, people suffering from leprosy, the children – they were all really welcome because the Kingdom that Jesus came to bring was open to everyone.

It is tragically true that every society pushes some people to the margins. In our own day it is often determined by ethnicity, colour, age, wealth and physical fitness. That means that as we follow Jesus we need to keep a special eye on those who might get overlooked – because God will never overlook them, and he calls on us to embrace them with his love.

QUESTION

Who are the equivalents of the shepherds in our own society?

PRAYER

Thank you Lord that your love reaches out to all. Help us to pass on your love to those who are overlooked by society. Amen.



