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Omicron – Bishop postpones Installation Service as precaution

In light of a predicted peak in the number of Omicron cases in Northern Ireland in mid-January, the Bishop of Connor has decided to postpone his Service of Installation in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast.

This was due to have been held on January 9. The Rt Rev George Davison said a new date would be arranged when it was safe to proceed.

The service was to have been by invitation only. In a message to all guests, Bishop George said: "Having reflected on information received from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer by representatives of faith groups last Friday and considered the advisability of gathering a significant number of people from across Co Antrim in January, I have decided to postpone the Service of Installation planned for St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, on the afternoon of January 9 2022.

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In a letter to clergy in Connor Diocese, Bishop George said that there was no suggestion at this stage that Christmas services in local parishes should not go ahead.

However, he said non-essential meetings and gatherings should be delayed, and advised clergy and parishioners to continue to carefully follow established mitigations to stop the spread of Covid-19.



Your presence in church this Christmas is a sign of hope to all who can't be there

As new Covid restrictions come into effect, Archbishop Michael Jackson has encouraged people who feel safe in attending church services this Christmas to do so to send a message of hope to those who can't.

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In a message to all the people of Dublin and Glendalough Archbishop Michael Jackson said this week:

“The new Covid restrictions which come into effect today are a sadness to all but a surprise to few.

“In regard to religious services, we Christians are still in a position to gather for worship indoors on Christmas Eve, on Christmas Day and on St Stephen’s Day, observing all relevant safety measures.

“For those of you who feel safe about gathering in person for worship on any of these days in the season of Christmas, I encourage you to do so.

“By your presence in church, you will be able to pray with and for those who cannot do so and who do not feel it is safe to go to church and who yet yearn to do so.

“You will be able to give to them the message of hope that they are not alone.

You will, in a real sense, be going not only on your own behalf but also on their behalf.

“Giving thanks is a key part of going to church. You can give thanks to God for God’s goodness and for the contributions in goodness made to ensure our safety and wellbeing by all who form the Front Line in our society. To them we remain eternally grateful.

“Christmas is the time of Emmanuel. And Emmanuel means: God is with us. I encourage those of you who feel it is safe to do so to be in church with God at Christmas time.”



Hope Rather Than Fear – A Christmas Message From Bishop Pat Storey

‘Be not afraid’ is one of the most frequently used phrases in the Bible, and we read it again during our Advent and Christmas services. Yet I wonder in the last two years if we have paid any attention to this instruction? Our news channels and social media are alight with fear and trepidation, and we can feel dejected when we pay them too much attention.

I know that there are times when I have been afraid – of Covid, of another cancelled Christmas, of not seeing my son for another year. It is a natural human instinct to feel fear. What, then does it mean when we are told in our Christmas readings not to be afraid?

Fear is true darkness – anyone who has been crippled by fear will know this. When you are afraid, it is so difficult to see any hint of light. When Mary is told not to be afraid by the angel Gabriel, I imagine she found that difficult. Do we think of Mary as being a real person with authentic feelings? In which case, of course she was afraid! But Gabriel wants to reassure her – your God is in control. You may feel unnerved, apprehensive, and have no idea what the future holds, but God in Jesus has his finger on the pulse. We do not know the future- but He does, and He holds it in His hands.

When we are afraid, we are told not to be, because even though it is perfectly normal and human, it does not reflect the goodness, the nearness, and the faithfulness of God.

Be not afraid, this Christmas! May it be a celebration, even if smaller than usual and a little subdued. He knows the future.

Happy Christmas. May 2022 hold hope rather than fear,

+Pat

Cross-community carol service takes place at west Belfast peace wall

A cross-community carol service was held at a west Belfast peace wall on Monday night.

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The choir from St Peter's Cathedral, members of the Falls Residents' Association and the congregation of New Life City Church all took part in the service at Northumberland Street.

Those in attendance sang a beautiful version of the Christmas carol Silent Night, at the peace wall which divides the Falls and Shankill Roads.

Tributes to the late Reverend Dr Gordon Gray

A former Presbyterian Moderator has paid tribute to one of the best-known ministers in the Church, the late Reverend Dr Gordon Gray, who died recently.

A funeral thanksgiving service for his life and work took place on Monday in Bushvale Presbyterian Church, Ballymoney.

The Very Rev Dr John Dunlop, who knew Dr Gray for many years, said: "He had a lifetime commitment to fostering inter-church relationships and he had a myriad of contacts within Ireland and internationally as well as being a member of the Corrymeela Community.

"He was a keen photographer and provided hundreds of pictures of the churches in Laurence Kirkpatrick's book *Presbyterians in Ireland: An Illustrated History*."

Dr Gray was ordained in Fisherwick Presbyterian Church in 1960. He was the first minister of a new church extension at

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Belvoir Park in 1963, and later became the Presbyterian Church's first Youth Secretary in 1966.

He then served with great distinction as minister of First Lisburn Presbyterian Church from 1973 until his retirement in 2001, when he moved to live in Ballycastle.

Rev Allen Sleith, a former assistant minister to Dr Gray in Lisburn, said: "Gordon was a passionate ecumenist whose breadth of vision for the church was totally international, and like John Wesley, the world was his parish.

"During the Troubles his work for peace and reconciliation was self-evident despite the criticisms and dangers in such a vocation. He was also the Convenor of the PCI Race Relations Committee."

On the 50th anniversary of his ordination, another former Moderator, the Very Rev Dr Godfrey Brown, said: "Gordon was a pioneer, always blazing a trail. His ministry was marked by innovation, hard work and his enormous courage which enabled him to do the difficult and often unpopular thing."

Dr Gray was predeceased by his wife Margaret, and is survived by his widow Pat, sons Philip, Timothy and Jeremy, sister Marlene and the wider family circle.

Webinars, music, resources, broadcasts and books

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Family Crib service Canterbury Cathedral Christmas Eve

At 11.00 for the Family Crib service - The joyful and informal family service tells the story of the birth of Jesus, with music from the Cathedral's Boy Choristers and the singing of traditional Christmas Carols bit.ly/Xmas21CC

Cappella Caeciliana - O Radiant Dawn

Winter Solstice - here is "O Radiant Dawn" Traditionally said/sung on this date, this "O antiphon" looks to brighter days ahead. Cappella Caeciliana sing "O Radiant Dawn" by James MacMillan. This was recorded in the chapel of Rathmore Grammar School, Belfast.

"O Radiant Dawn, splendour of eternal light, sun of justice, come and shine on those who dwell in darkness..."

[[] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGmyrm3NsSs>]

The Lord has come - Christmas Hymn piano

'And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.' - Luke 2:10-11

[[] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN8aGYrx3u8>]

News Reports

Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland on the recent NI Assembly vote on the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion

‘The effect of similar legislation in other parts of the world has been to screen out of existence an entire sector of humanity... the Abortion Law in Northern Ireland will send a message to all citizens that unborn disabled babies, are fundamentally less valued than those who are able-bodied. This is the opposite of a commitment to equality, professed by so many who support this unjust legislation.’ – Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland

This statement - carried below - is issued in the names of Archbishop Eamon Martin, Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of All-Ireland and Apostolic Administrator of Dromore; Bishop Noel Treanor, Bishop of Down and Connor; Bishop Donal McKeown, Bishop of Derry; Bishop Larry Duffy, Bishop of Clogher; and, Bishop Michael Router Auxiliary Bishop of Armagh -

It is a matter of grave concern for all those who uphold the preciousness and dignity of every human life that the current legal framework in Northern Ireland permits abortion, to the point of birth, where an unborn child is found to be suffering from a serious but non-life-threatening disability. The nature of such a disability is not defined in our legislation but will include conditions such as Down’s Syndrome. The effect of similar legislation in other parts of the world, especially in Scandinavia, has been to screen out of existence an entire sector of humanity.

The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill, recently voted on in our Assembly, was a measured and reasonable attempt to address this injustice and remove from the current abortion regulations discrimination against unborn children with non-fatal disabilities. Its defeat in the Northern Ireland Assembly represents a profound and fundamental failure to respect the equality of all persons, born and unborn, in our society.

As a consequence, the Abortion Law in Northern Ireland will send a message to all citizens that unborn disabled babies are less valued than those who are able-bodied. This is the opposite of a commitment to equality, professed by so many who supported, directly or indirectly, the progress of this unjust legislation.

To dispose of unborn human beings on the grounds that they are disabled is morally abhorrent and indefensible in a civilised society. Laws that discriminate unjustly against persons with disabilities at any time, including the time they spend in their mother's womb, are completely unacceptable.

Discrimination in this context is not limited to the unborn child with a disability. Those parents who choose to continue with the pregnancy could also face the prospect of being discriminated against when it comes to accessing medical care, education and financial support for their child. Therefore, every effort must be made to ensure that children with disabilities and their families are treated justly with regard to the allocation of resources and funding. It is the least they can expect in a society which claims to value respect and compassion in the treatment of all its citizens.

We have consistently called for the equal right to life and compassionate care for a mother and her unborn child. The genuine difficulties experienced by some women in pregnancy are not addressed by ignoring the existence of the other life, or by supporting the fiction that abortion is exclusively a 'health care issue' or solely a matter of individual choice. The right to life and the equal dignity of every person is the concern of every person and the whole of society, not just the individual concerned.

As we approach the celebration of the birth of the child Jesus, a birth which brings the hope of peace rooted in dignity to the whole world, we call on all Christians and citizens who believe in the equal rights of all, to redouble their efforts to defend the most vulnerable in our society from this unjust legislation. As we look to a new year in which we will all have the opportunity to elect those responsible for our legislative values and framework, we shall all need to reflect carefully on the central importance of these fundamental human values in the decisions we make.

UK's biggest carol services cancelled due to Covid

The UK's biggest in-person carol services have been cancelled due to coronavirus.

Holy Trinity Brompton Church (HTB) and Hillsong Church London have both announced they will move their carol services online due to the spread of the Omicron variant.



In a statement on Facebook, Hillsong said a number of people of their cast and crew have tested positive for Covid.

“Unfortunately, the recent rise of Covid-19 has significantly impacted our cast and crew and we had to make a difficult decision to postpone London Carols to next year,” the statement said.

“The steps we are taking are to help keep our staff, volunteers, you and your families safe. We want to ensure the health and safety of everyone involved is our main priority so people can enjoy Christmas together with friends and family.”

HTB has followed suit and announced that the carol service event and all in-person services will be paused until 2nd January.

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The statement reads: “To protect our community from rising Covid-19 rates we’re pausing all our HTB in-person services for the next two weeks.

“There will be no in-person or online services on Friday the 24th of December or Sunday the 26th of December, but you can catch up on past Sundays and Carol Services on our YouTube channel.

“We plan to resume in-person services with ticketing, social distancing, and face coverings from the 2nd of January, but we’ll keep you updated.”

Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has declared a major incident in London after a “huge surge” of covid cases in the capital.

He said: “We are already feeling the impact across the capital and while we are still learning about this variant, it’s right that London’s key agencies work closely together to minimise the impact on our city, including helping to protect the vital vaccination programme.”

Archbishop of Canterbury says he was 'disappointed' to see picture of party at Conservative HQ

The Archbishop of Canterbury has shared his thoughts on the Christmas gathering at the Conservative Party headquarters last December.

Earlier this week, the Daily Mirror published a photograph showing Tory former mayoral candidate Shaun Bailey and

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dozens of other people at a Christmas party during lockdown last year.

Speaking to the BBC's Newscast podcast, Most Rev Justin Welby said he was "disappointed" when he saw the photograph, but he was not "a big one for throwing stones".

"My favourite story in the Bible, one my favourites, is when someone's dragged up in front of Jesus, a woman caught in adultery, and they say: 'Should she be stoned?' And Jesus just says: 'those without sin cast the first stone' and all her accusers

go away.

And he

says:

'Does

nobody

judge

you?' And

she says:

'no'. And

he says:

'Well, go

your way

and don't

do it again'. Now, that's Jesus. That seems a quite good example."



He continued: "I think that not so much social media, but most people in most places when someone puts their hand up and say: 'Look, that was a stupid thing to do. And I shouldn't have done that,' even today, there's a level of forgiveness... and I noticed the former mayoral candidate

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immediately step down, that seems to me to be an honourable and proper way of doing it."

The Conservative party has admitted the event took place on December 14, when London was in Tier 2 restrictions, and said that staff have been disciplined.

The rules meant that no mixing was allowed indoors apart from with your household or bubble.

Archbishop Welby added that he believes creating a culture of honesty from the top is "clearly essential" and described the Queen as an "extraordinary example."

"Isn't it wonderful that we have such an extraordinary example at the top of the Queen with her complete integrity in every possible way."

New Religion Editor is an exceptionally thoughtful reporter says BBC boss



The BBC has announced the next Religion Editor for BBC News following a competitive recruitment process, the organisation said.

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Aleem Maqbool will take the lead on the BBC's expert analysis and insight on the major themes and issues affecting different faiths in the UK and around the world.

Maqbool said: "I am delighted to take up a role that focuses on telling stories associated with faith and ethics and reflecting on the complex way in which they continue to shape our society. After many years in foreign news, I also look forward to working with a wonderful team in London".

His appointment comes months after former Religion Editor Martin Bashir stepped down from the role on health grounds. He had been on sick pay for a long period due to Covid-19 related complications.

Bashir also made headlines after an investigation into his Panorama interview with Princess Diana revealed he used "deceitful behaviour" to secure the interview.

Maqbool is the current BBC News North America Correspondent and has been based in Washington DC since 2004.

Deputy director of BBC News and head of news content, Jonathan Muro, said: "Aleem has always been an exceptionally thoughtful reporter and analyst with journalistic drive and a strong vision for reaching new audiences and delivering on digital. I think he'll be fantastic".

Welsh village defies vandals with life-sized nativity scene



A village in Wales has created a life-sized nativity scene, a year after the previous one was fire-bombed by vandals.

The community in Raglan in Gwent rallied round to create the new pieces after the stable set in the local bus shelter was destroyed on Christmas Eve last year.

Lyndon Price is one of the volunteers behind the nativity scene project. He's been telling Premier why the community is determined to defy the vandals this year.

"Last year's scene was created in the bus shelter right in the centre of the village in the shadow of St Patrick's church. It's a beautiful setting and looks just like an old stable. Last year was an awful year for everyone and so it was wonderful to

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see it and give that Christmas spirit back to the community. It took months of work to create and it was put up on Christmas Eve. Then someone fire-bombed the whole thing, destroying all the figures and the bus shelter in the process. It was absolutely atrocious, devastating and beyond words."

Three years ago, the display's figure of Mary was stolen and two shepherds were also taken in 2019.

"The community absolutely adore this symbol and suddenly, one evening out of the blue Mary disappeared, never to be seen again. Leaving the community absolutely devastated that somebody amongst them could do this to such a lovely symbol."

But over the last year, new characters have been created, designed by Liz Friendship, a retired theatre design lecturer. Lyndon Price says she spends a few hours each day creating the costumes.

"They're real theatre costumes and the work and the detail that goes into them is absolutely phenomenal. We have electricians, we have carpenters, and together, everyone just brings the community together. All for these few weeks, just before Christmas, just to bring that a little bit of joy and a little bit of hope to everyone."

Lyndon Price says the village has stepped up security around the nativity this year with more CCTV. It's also been sited in a more central location outside the local Beaufort Hotel where it's hoped guests and residents will keep an eye on any suspicious activity.

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"This year, particularly after last year's devastation, nobody wanted to be beaten, everyone wanted to carry on and do it again. Regardless of everything that's gone on before. Everyone got together, did it, produced it and it's back!"

Poem for today

The Innkeeper's Wife by Clive Sansom

I love this byre. Shadows are kindly here.
The light is flecked with travelling stars of dust,
So quiet it seems after the inn-clamour,
Scraping of fiddles and the stamping feet.
Only the cows, each in her patient box,
Turn their slow eyes, as we and the sunlight enter,
Their slowly rhythmic mouths.
'That is the stall,
Carpenter. You see it's too far gone
For patching or repatching. My husband made it,
And he's been gone these dozen years and more...'

Strange how this lifeless thing, degraded wood
Split from the tree and nailed and crucified
To make a wall, outlives the mastering hand
That struck it down, the warm firm hand
That touched my body with its wandering love.
'No, let the fire take them. Strip every board
And make a new beginning. Too many memories lurk
Like worms in this old wood. That piece you're holding –
That patch of grain with the giant's thumbprint –
I stared at it a full hour when he died:
Its grooves are down my mind. And that board there

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Baring its knot-hole like a missing jig-saw –
I remember another hand along its rim.
No, not my husband's and why I should remember
I cannot say. It was a night in winter.
Our house was full, tight-packed as salted herrings –
So full, they said, we had to hold our breaths
To close the door and shut the night-air out!

And then two travellers came. They stood outside
Across the threshold, half in the ring of light
And half beyond it. I would have let them in
Despite the crowding – the woman was past her time –
But I'd no mind to argue with my husband,
The flagon in my hand and half the inn
Still clamouring for wine. But when trade slackened,
And all our guests had sung themselves to bed
Or told the floor their troubles, I came out here
Where he had lodged them. The man was standing
As you are now, his hand smoothing that board –
He was a carpenter, I heard them say.
She rested on the straw, and on her arm
A child was lying. None of your crease-faced brats
Squalling their lungs out. Just lying there
As calm as a new-dropped calf – his eyes wide open,
And gazing round as if the world he saw
In the chaff-strewn light of the stable lantern
Was something beautiful and new and strange.
Ah well, he'll have learnt different now, I reckon,
Wherever he is. And why I should recall
A scene like that, when times I would remember
Have passed beyond reliving, I cannot think.
It's a trick you're served by old possessions:
They have their memories too – too many memories.

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Well, I must go in. There are meals to serve.
Join us there, Carpenter, when you've had enough
Of cattle-company. The world is a sad place,
But wine and music blunt the truth of it.

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