

Christmas 2020

Glory to God in the Highest Heaven and peace to those on Earth. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How does Darth Vader enjoy his Christmas Turkey? On the dark side!

After the year we have had, things can certainly feel rather dark at the moment. And Christmas this year has all the hallmarks of being one of the strangest on record. Just last week all our plans for seeing family and friends were thrown into turmoil as a dangerous surge in infection rates forced the government to pull back from earlier plans to allow larger family groups to meet for several days over Christmas. Then just yesterday, we were all alerted to the fact that come Boxing Day we will be moved into Tier 4 restrictions, because the increase in Covid-19 cases have risen so sharply. In many ways, it feels like all of our Christmas plans have been cancelled.

For so many months we had looked forward to a bit of respite and joy, hoping that we may come together with family or friends in intimate gatherings to celebrate Christmas, this most holy of seasons. And yet we find ourselves, the moment we are supposed to be celebrating the most intimate of engagements, God taking on human form in the person of the baby Jesus in order that he may be close to us and embrace us; this is the very moment when we are being forced into separation from those close to us who we hold so dear. There can be no tender embrace or loving touch with most of those we love this year. And we so long to touch, kiss, hug, embrace. This lack of physical contact has been especially difficult for us when we have been lonely, sad, anxious, frightened, grieving... That is the most painful thing. And many of us will be feeling some or all these things this Christmas time.

So, we find ourselves in a cruel paradox – just as we recognize God with us in an intimate way through his Son, we are unable to share intimately with others.

To be physical is to be human, that is the reality that we see in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God moves close to us through our physical existence and it is through our physical existence that we need to encounter him. Without him physically present with us, we become less than human. And as we gaze at his perfectly human life, we see that our open interaction with others is key too.

So often we encounter God through our loving actions towards others and their loving actions towards us. We feel intimately spiritually connected when we allow ourselves to engage with the physically or spiritually impoverished. Even more so when we begin to recognize our own impoverishment, in whatever manifestation it may take and let others help us too. We become aware of a deep spiritual bond when we hold the elderly relative's hand or sit with the lonely neighbour; when we spend time with someone who is homeless or mentor the young person; when we side with a group of people who are disadvantaged or show compassion to someone who is paying for their mistakes.

And yet, I would say that despite the restrictions stopping us from being as physically present with each other as we would like, there has been some good to have come out of this time too. To steal a recent phrase of our Bishop – 'we have become aware that everyone is precious'. As a result, we seem to have become more inclined to act on behalf of other people's dignity.

It is certainly undeniable that we have become more aware of the vulnerable in our society: the lonely, the isolated, the financially poor, the disadvantaged, the emotionally strained... Perhaps we finally realize that for most of us the line between comfort and destitution is a very fine line indeed. Poverty comes in many different forms and no longer can we push the poverty on our doorstep into the hedgerow and pretend it is not there.

But not only are we far more likely to recognize it now, we have also proved that we are more inclined to respond with kindness than perhaps we were a year or two ago. Maybe we are slowly learning to be less selfish? I would say that we have seen evidence of this everywhere these past few months, as individuals and communities have come together to support each other: checking in on neighbours, delivering food parcels, supporting foodbanks, providing meals and delivering much needed prescriptions. We have, I think, discovered how much we have taken for granted and just how much we have to be grateful for: our families, our communities and maybe even our churches. We have also been reminded of how the small things matter; the quick phone call, the small gift, the thoughtful card.

What we celebrate today, when you think on it, is the smallest of things. That God should choose to engage us through such a tiny baby born into such insignificant surroundings, is rather remarkable. And yet from

this tiny thing, the greatest of outcomes! Somehow in the humility, meekness and modesty of this divine act of kindness all our small acts of kindness are caught up.

As we gaze at the manger and see the Holy Family in poverty, away from home and threatened, with their helpless baby defenseless and vulnerable, how can we not feel compassion for all those who are themselves far away from home this Christmas, all who do not know where the next meal will come from, all who are vulnerable or whose very lives are threatened? And if we allow that Christ-child to properly work on our hearts, then maybe we will feel called to respond with some small act of kindness too.

Maybe it is in this way that Christ is being born into our hearts again and again; and through his Spirit working in us, we are becoming the people he calls us to be.

Christmas is coming. The goose is getting fat. Please put a penny in the old man's hat.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, may your Christmas Spirit dwell with us, those we love and those in need this holy and joyous season. Amen.