

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Christmas Day 2024 10.30am



St. Peter's Notting Hill

Kensington Park Rd, London W11 2PN

Luke 2: 1-20

May I speak in the name of the living
God,
Father,
Son
and Holy Spirit.

And May I again wish you all a Happy and Blessed Christmas.

The WhatsApp announcements for this Service contained the rather firm words: "There will be a short message".

So I will take the hint and be brief!

Let's start with the last verse of our Reading and follow Mary by pondering on the joy of Christmas.

"I bring you good news of great joy" declared the Angels,

They were the only people, apart from God who understood

- the enormity,
- the intensity
- the heights,
- the depths
- and the spectacular meaning of the event we celebrate today.

The birth of the Saviour of the World.

No-one other than God could possibly have known that this tiny baby,
newly born in a manger,
would radically change

- our world,
- our civilisation,
- our history

– and our own human hearts?

So let's gratefully ponder on the joy His presence has brought into our lives.

Not only to those here this morning, but to untold numbers of His followers and believers down through millennia.

Glory to God in the Highest indeed!

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This year, we've celebrated Christmas gloriously well at St Peter's.

Numerically, we had over 800 people at the Open-Air Carol Service on our streets eight days ago.

The following day, we had 360 people at our Evening Candlelight Service,

And other well-attended 10.30am Services in between.

Spiritually, we cannot yet know what the effects of our Services

- from the Carols
- to the Talks,
- the Prayers,
- the mince pies and the mulled wine

will have on human hearts.

But, sooner or later, the real world should remind that Christmas season is not just of celebration, but also of compassion.

So let's also ponder on other dimensions of Christmas, some of which are just as dear to our Lord's heart as the joyful

- Singing
- Praying
- and blessings of Carol Services.

Let me try to illustrate some of these compassionate dimensions by taking you with me on the rest of my Christmas Day.

* * *

After this Service, I will drive with my
faithful
carer,
friend and prayer partner, Jessie,
to Her Majesty's Prison, Pentonville, in North London.

Thanks to the Law of Buggin's turn, I am now the Senior Anglican Chaplain there – would you Adam and Eve it? (as they say on the wings!)

Having spent Christmas Day in jail as a prisoner myself exactly 25 years ago,
I understand the sadness
of being behind bars,
cut off from family and friends,
And feeling helpless
and hopeless at Christmas.

And so, of course, did Jesus, who was once a prisoner Himself, as were many of his early disciples.

In his most challenging parable, the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew Chapter 24),

He commanded us to help:

- The hungry
- The thirsty
- The homeless
- And, yes, the prisoners.

All these and other vulnerable groups should be our priority concerns at Christmas, as should those who are sick, or caring for or nursing the sick.

As it happens, my next Christmas Day call after Pentonville will be to Great Ormond Street Hospital.

A baby girl born there a few days ago, Leonora May, is in a perilous and agonisingly painful condition after heart and lung surgery.

She is in a life-threatening situation.

Please do remember Baby Leonora in your prayers.

Her family, dear friends of mine, live in Notting Hill and occasionally worship here in St Peter's.

Inevitably, some of them may be feeling disappointed with God.

Perhaps they will ask this question:

"How can a supposedly all-loving and all-powerful God let this happen to an innocent newborn baby?"

I remember asking much the same question 42 years ago.

I was in the intensive care Maternity Unit of a Swiss Hospital
looking down with tear filled eyes looking down at a tiny baby in an
incubator
who was

- struggling to breathe
- because her blood was infected,
- Her oxygen levels were falling

her condition was deteriorating.

The top Paediatrician at the Hospital came alongside the incubator and
gently gave me the bad news.

“I’m afraid she will not survive the night” he said.

Now, **SHE**, this suffering dying baby in the incubator was my own,
prematurely born, one week old daughter Victoria.

She not only survived the night,

She is

- alive,
- well,
- and flourishing.

Last night she came with me when I was leading the Midnight Mass Service
(wearing golden robes) at another London Church St Matthew's
Westminster.

Tomorrow I will be having a Christmas feast of turkey and Christmas
pudding with Victoria, her twin sister and her brother and six members of
my family.

Hallelujah for a

- traditional
- convivial
- family Christmas!

Victoria is alive and well because God knew better than the consultant.

He always knows better than any of us.

And he also understands the broader meanings of Christmas more deeply than any of us do.

What are those:

- Broader
- Wider
- Deeper meanings of Christmas?

Let me take you back four or five Sundays ago when Pat, our Vicar, like many other Vicars, referred to one of the great Advent Collects for what is sometimes known as "Stir Up Sunday".

It is so called because in the Book of Common Prayer it begins with the memorable words:

"Stir up we beseech thee the wills of thy faithful people."

It is also called up "Stir Up Sunday" because that is traditionally the day, a month or so before Christmas, when old fashioned

- grandmothers,
- mothers,
- home cooks
- and their families used to stir up their Christmas puddings.

I can vividly remember, even in the food rationing days of the 1940s, the enthusiasm in which we all joined in the stirring up of the family Christmas pudding.

In addition to all those wonderfully smelling exotic ingredients such as

- raisons,
- cinnamon,
- clementines,
- apricots,
- ginger and all sorts of other exotica.

My grandmother also tossed into the mix a number of "charms" wrapped up in tiny packets of greaseproof paper.

For example, in went a ring which hopefully would be pulled out on Christmas Day would be a young lady hoping to get engaged.

On the same matrimonial theme, another charm was a pair of silver wedding veils (hint hint)!

But then to strike a balance in went a charm known as "the bachelor's button."

Destined perhaps for some young man who wanted to stay single.

So on it went as we all came up and stirred away.

The final charm I remember was a silver Threepenny bit.

Still legal tender in those days a most elegant small coin of real silver.

Whoever pulled out the silver threepenny was destined to get rich.
He would probably be a Hedge Fund Manager nowadays!

So Stir Up Sunday was great fun in the preparations for Christmas.

And we should try not to lose the fun of Christmas.

Oliver Cromwell and his puritan Parliamentarians in the year 1656 passed
a law barring festivities at Christmas.

Happily, that law was swept off the Statutory Book many centuries ago.

Christians cannot be narrowly restricted by law makers.

But it can be broadened out by love givers.

On a broad canvas we have already mentioned this morning:

- A Carol Singing Christmas
- A Joyful Christmas;
- A Celebration Christmas;
- A Compassionate Christmas;
- A Convivial Christmas.

And perhaps we should also mention a real-life Christmas.
When things can temporarily go wrong.

With Christmas tears and tantrums.

But above all let's all hope and pray for a loving Christmas.

Yesterday I heard on the radio a song with the refrain:

"Wherever you find love it feels like Christmas."

Spot on.

For where love is God is there also.

May God be with you all this Christmas morning.

Amen