

Christmas 2020 message from Rt Rev. Julian Henderson, Bishop of Blackburn

Bishop Julian's message [is available here on our YouTube channel](#). It was recorded at The Pantry ... Fleetwood Foodbank ... part of the Faith in the Community project in the town which recently [featured in a 'road trip' video](#) as part of our online Diocesan conference #HomeGrown: Hearts on Fire with Love for You'.

Welcome to Fleetwood and the remarkable work that the churches here are doing to provide food parcels for the many who are finding it hard to manage and get by.

I have to be honest and say mixed emotions race around inside me when I visit a foodbank. Some feelings are of appreciation for what is being so generously and graciously offered: that is fantastic and thanks to all involved here and around the country.

But my other emotions are of shame and embarrassment that such a place and service is needed at all. What is it saying about our society that so many are having to rely on the support of foodbanks?

Some may have seen the news item a couple of weeks ago about the serious poverty that some in Lancashire are facing at this time. Many were deeply moved and I am delighted that the country and even other parts of the world have responded with gifts of support.

And while these charitable initiatives are to be applauded, they are not the solution in the longer term.

Yes, they bring relief for this week - for today - and for that we are hugely grateful; but they do not get to the root of the problem.

Why is it that there seems to be an ever-widening gap between those who have and those have not? What is being done to reduce the pressures that foster a decline in our nation's mental health?

How can we prevent addictions to drugs, alcohol and gambling causing more damage to relationships and general wellbeing? Sadly, all of these issues have escalated because of the 2020 pandemic, with increased job losses and debt adding to the problem.

I don't want in a Christmas message to spread doom and gloom, but we have to face facts and the truth of the situation. It is too easy to bury our heads in the sand, hoping the problems won't be here tomorrow.

But the reality of how things are sets me up to speak of the hope the Christmas message brings to the table. It's all about a God who sees all that and demonstrates He wants to do something about it.

God sent His only Son into this messy and confusing world, arriving as a vulnerable baby and knowing all along that from the start He would be rejected and vilified, ultimately leading to His crucifixion.

Love came down at Christmas. We celebrate God's intervention. But it was not just an appearance on the world stage. It was a rescue mission. He came to give His life as a sacrifice, to take on Himself the consequences of the sin of the world, so the world could be free. He came to do what we could not do for ourselves, so that we might be able to receive His forgiveness of our sins and be assured of eternal life.

Now that does go to the root of the problem. When we turn to Him in repentance and faith, God gives us a new heart, a new nature. We are a new creation. That doesn't remove all the pressing problems of day-to-day living, but it does give us the strength to handle them; to see them in a proper perspective and to begin to live differently.

It is a very big temptation to hope that after the pandemic ceases its ravaging campaign of destruction around the world everything will go back to normal; to what we were used to and to the familiar and so many of us say it. I want to encourage us to think of and plan for a new and better 'normal'.

A normal where foodbanks are not necessary; where those able to work can find meaningful jobs; where our mental health hospitals have got empty beds; where communities care for one another; where addictions are reducing and where there's a groundswell of new faith in Jesus rising up all around the County.

So as I wish all the people of Lancashire a happy Christmas, it is with this hope, that many will discover why the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is so significant; will discover the difference that knowing Him today can make in our lives and so embrace the new and better normal for 2021 and beyond.

Let me leave you with words from the New Testament...

For you know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich.

Knowing Him deals with the root of the problems in our society. It's a big claim, but I am convinced it is true!