

## **Christmas Message 2020 by Rt Rev. Philip North, Bishop of Burnley**

*The YouTube version of Bishop Philip's message [is available here on our YouTube channel](#). It was recorded at Blackburn Cathedral while rehearsals for a carol service, being held according to current guidelines, took place in the background.*

'It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas,' goes the old song. I only wish it were!

Christmas 2020 doesn't look much like Christmas at all.

No Christmas carols. No parties. No kissing under the mistletoe. No hugging granny. Closed pubs. Every social encounter distanced and suffused with guilt.

What kind of Christmas is that? Some people are even claiming Christmas is cancelled.

So how do we find any Christmas joy in this year of pandemic?

I'm at Blackburn Cathedral where, in a few minutes, a Carol Service is going to break out, led by the choir of St Christopher's School in Accrington and one of the carols might give an answer to our question. 'O Come O Come Emmanuel,' they will sing.

Emmanuel. That was a name given to Jesus by the angel. It means, 'God with us.'

Why do the angels sing on Christmas night? Why do the shepherds rejoice? Why do the wise men set off with their gifts?

Because that baby is no ordinary baby. He is God. God is with us. Emmanuel.

If you can believe in that claim, then there is no such thing as a cancelled Christmas, or indeed a joyless Christmas. In Jesus, God is with you.

If you are alone and anxious this Christmas, he is with you. If you are worried about money or your job, he is with you. If you've got Covid, he is with you. If you're crazily stressed because you're a keyworker, he is with you.

If you are missing family or friends, he is with you. God is present in your life, filling it with his peace and his love. And nothing can take that away. Just look for him, pray to him in any words you want to use, and you will know him to be with you.

God is with us in Jesus. And if that's true, there's even better news. God isn't with us just for the sake of it, like a boring party guest who never makes it home. There is a purpose in his being with.

He is with us so that we can be with him. He comes to earth, in order to scoop us up to heaven. He shares our humanity so that we can share his divinity. Because He is with us we ordinary men and women, raised up from the dust of the earth, can be with him for ever.

This Christmas, there may not be much joy to be found in the usual places – the parties, the meals, the family gatherings and so on.

So why not look in a different direction for joy this year? With the shepherds, look into the crib, look at Jesus. Ask yourself, 'Who is this child?' Just another baby? Or is this indeed God with us, God come to share our life so that we can share his life?

For then, as you offer your heart to him you will find a joy that nothing, not a pandemic, not even death itself, can ever take away. Emmanuel. God is with you.

So Happy Christmas!

**+Philip Burnley**