

The Bishop of London's Christmas message to the Diocese



I am looking forward to the Christmas festival more than usually this year. Some times in the past it has been obscured by the light pollution from which we suffer in great cities during the season of getting and spending. This year we have been forced to face up to the darkness in this very perilous world and as a result it is perhaps easier to see the star which leads us to the significance of the birth of Christ. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

The Copenhagen Conference, as I speak, is drawing to its inconclusive end, promising further negotiations. The wisdom of the world has been on display with its sectarian mentality. It has helped me to see freshly once again the astonishing and dangerous generosity in the Christmas story. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. The messenger of God comes to Mary and instead of replying that the promised god-send did not fit in with her own life plan, she said "Behold the hand maid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word".

The sectarian mentality and the frequent lack of interest in anything that was "not invented here" are huge obstacles on the road to God's future for the world. Dante the great poet of the Christian West, at the end of his Divine comedy, describes that future as "all the scattered leaves of the universe bound by love in one volume". The Church is called to be the transforming community created by the generosity of God working to open a fissure in the world so that God's future can enter in. This is why we pray "thy kingdom come" to open up the present to God's end time.

One of the many reasons why I have a humble pride in being a part of the Church of England in the Diocese of London is that there is such an abundance of evidence in the work you are doing that we are not a community that acts in a sectarian way merely concerned with the interests of our own members.

There is generous spirit in the work of our church schools in the Diocese. In the London Challenge, our route map as a community for the period leading up to the London Olympics we pledged ourselves to increase by 2,012 the number of places in our schools by 2012. This pledge has already been over fulfilled. More than 4,000 extra places have been created. Contrary to ill informed criticism this has been done both to satisfy the demand from parents and as a service to the whole community and not just those who worship in our churches.

We continue to generate new initiatives in the missionary work which expresses itself in generous service. A video has been made describing some of the projects from across the Diocese that have been made possible with the support of the Bishop of London's Mission Fund. I hope that this video will have a wide circulation. Please get in touch with Rob Hargrave at London Diocesan House to discuss how to make a copy available to

your community. The intention is to encourage confidence in the Spirit and stimulate emulation in your parish and Deanery.

The generous spirit also moved one of our Deaneries recently to recruit "flu friends" willing to deliver medicines to the housebound and isolated. The scheme was at first warmly welcomed by the Local Authority but then a call came from the town hall. Victims of swine flu could be described as "vulnerable adults" and in consequence anyone volunteering as a "flu friend" would need to go through the lengthy process of CRB checks. The elaboration of defensive bureaucracy based on a culture of suspicion is a threat to a generous community life.

Another example of intelligent and spiritually aware generous action has been enthusiastically endorsed by the Mayor of London. He supported the use of Trafalgar Square for "the feeding of the five thousand" intended to draw attention to the scandalous waste of food in a world where so many are hungry. It was the brainchild of a remarkable young man called Tristram Stuart, whose recent book, "Waste", is an essay on the sinful ways in which we relate to the earth and to our neighbours by wasting so much of what we harvest. Bishops are often accused of talking rubbish but on this occasion I was glad to do so. We were meant to take life into ourselves with thanksgiving, to use the earth by turning it into health and praise of the Creator and gifts of love for one another. Instead in our spiritual unawareness we have not used the earth in this way, we have abused it and converted much of it into refuse. We have come so far away from our Christian moorings that EU figures suggest that 40-60% of the fish caught in European waters are discarded before even they are landed. Conversion in life means turning away from being a mere consumer; turning in the direction of the generosity of God who so loved the world. We are to be citizens of the Kingdom Christ came to inaugurate, practising love of neighbour and a contemplative way seeing all things with a loving regard.

A 19th German atheist sneeringly said that "man is what he eats" "der Mensch ist was er isst". But that is the message of the Bible and the meaning of the feeding of the five thousand. But how we eat and enjoy the Christmas feast is vitally important. We are to take the world into ourselves and convert the world into spirit. We should be treating our earth with respect knowing that our well being depends on the well being of our planet. We should be mindful of the hungry in a land of plenty where we can apparently afford to discard 25% of what we buy. We should devise a simple prayer over our dustbins and develop our awareness of how heavy or light, how generous or selfish, is our footprint on the earth.

My dustbin prayer is this:

God the Creator and Source of life we thank you for the fruits of the earth and the human labour which prepares them for our use. May we take the life of the earth into ourselves and so nourish a way of being in the world that is generous; mindful always of the needs of others and full of praise. Through him who took bread and gave you thanks; then gave his very self to others, Jesus Christ. Amen.

While so many people are immobilised by fear of what is coming on the world, Christians can share the confidence which comes from beyond ourselves, from beyond our powers. The Christ-child was born of a pure virgin to draw us by love into his community. God did not come as a dictator demanding submission but as a vulnerable child.

I am thrilled that once again this year the numbers of those offering themselves for ordination through our Diocese has reached 150. These are people who have caught the vision and have offered their lives to be witnesses to the truth that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Thanks be to God.

Beloved you will no doubt be busy this Christmas with celebrations in your home or parish. I know that you will be on the look out to embrace those who will find this season especially painful whether because of their loneliness or because of some bereavement. We can be joyful in the generosity of God and reflect in the way we celebrate His love of the world. May God give you joy this Christmas; may he be present at your table and in your home as he will be present in the bread and the wine of the Christmas Communion. May God bless you, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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