

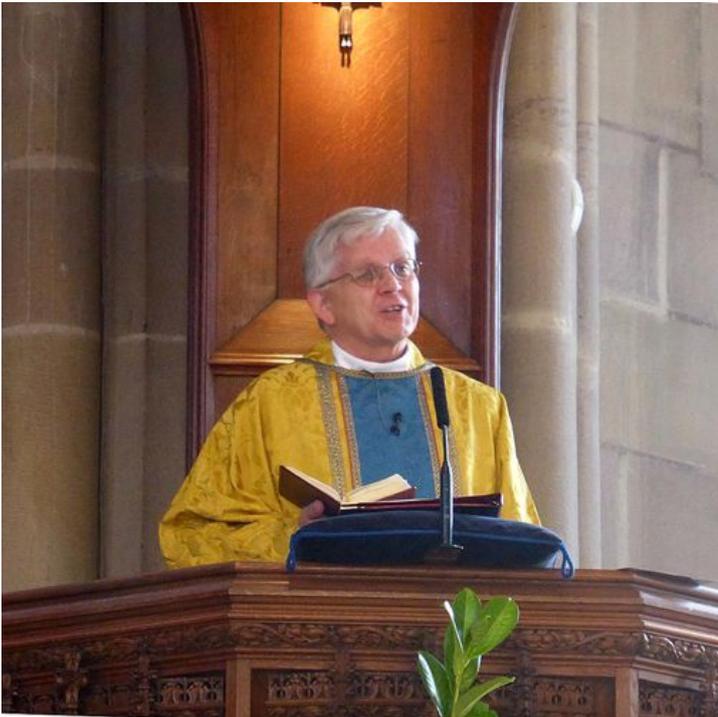
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BLACKBURN CATHEDRAL CHRISTMAS MORNING 2013

Bishop Julian's first Christmas Day Sermon as Bishop of Blackburn

'I bring you Good News of great joy'



I don't know about you, but I am saddened by the increasing number of people who talk of Christmas as a time to be survived. We read articles in the papers dreading it and advising people how to cope. The sign on someone's door in South London says it all:

'Friends welcome, relatives by appointment!'

How grieved must God be to see such a negative attitude towards a festival that, at least in its origins, was intended to be a celebration of the birth of His Son. How grieved must He be at the many who find no time to pause and give thanks.

How grieved must He be at the way the western world is becoming embarrassed by Christmas, removing Christ out of Christmas, and replacing Him with our contemporary idols of food, drink, entertainment, sport, shopping ... and the list could go on!

Well, I must stop having a moan and be more positive, and to do so I want to turn our attention on this Christmas morning to one part of the message of the angels to the shepherds, Luke 2.10, short and easy to remember:

I bring you Good News of great joy



It would be quite legitimate to ask where that joy might be found this Christmas:

for refugees fleeing from the fighting in Syria and facing the coldest winter for 100 years,

for the frightened communities in Southern Sudan, wondering where the current unrest is leading.

Or closer to home, those whose plans for Christmas have been disrupted by the severe weather, those who face 2014 with no prospect of work and ongoing dependency on the escalating number of food banks, those struggling with scars from the past from various forms of abuse, those coping with illness, bereavement and loneliness.

Did you know that there are about 600 visitors a day to **A & E** here in Blackburn (probably more over the holiday period), and about 500 callers a day to Crisis by those with homelessness issues?



What is the Good News of great joy in a suffering world?

1. Not peace on earth

Were this to be the main plank of the Christian agenda, then the cause of Christ has failed spectacularly during the last 2,000 years. Not only has religion contributed to the unrest and hostilities in the world

century after century, but we live in a fearful world, unsure when and where the next suicide bomb will be set off.

Yes, we work to see the Kingdom of God come in greater measure and for there to be goodwill between individuals and nations, but the Good News of great joy contains no promise that our lives will be free (in this life) of the pains and sufferings of a fallen world. There is no promise that the Christian church will be free of persecution in 2014. So what is the good news of great joy for the Syrian refugee?



There was, and is, the promise of **peace with God**, the restoration of a relationship that had been broken because of mankind's independence of God.

To be at peace with someone is to be at ease with them, to relax with them, to enjoy their company, and the Good News of the Christian faith is **God has made this possible for all through what Jesus came to do**; His death on a cross, which we remember, and in which we participate, in this service of Holy Communion.

**Good news of great joy is not peace on earth in our time,
(though that will come ultimately, when Jesus returns)
but the promise of peace with God for all who put their trust in Him.**

2. Not health of body

Were our physical well-being the central benchmark of the Christian faith, again the cause of Christ would have failed spectacularly, because we continue to live in a suffering world, plagued by sickness and disease. In spite of the marvellous advances of medical science and the increase of effective treatments, we still have to face the possibility of illness and finally the inevitability of death.

There was, and is, no promise of good health and deliverance from pain in this life. Yes, we pray for healing and deliverance and there are those times when the power of God intervenes and we rejoice in His mercy and the signs of His coming Kingdom.

But there was, and is, a promise of a healthy soul, healed of guilt through forgiveness, saved from the judgment of God, rescued from purposelessness, set free from selfish desires.

Despite what people may say, Christmas is not only for children and families. It is for **all** people, because we are **all** sinners, people who fall short of the glory of God, and so need a Saviour and forgiveness.



Good News is not about a healthy body, but a healthy soul.

Mirror INVESTIGATES FOOD BANK BRITAIN

**SCANDAL OF
1/4 MILLION
SURVIVING
ON FOOD
HANDOUTS**
Even people in work are on breadline



3. Not abundance of material things

Were Christianity about material prosperity, living the comfortable life, then once again it has failed spectacularly over the last 2,000 years.

Some people still live in abject poverty in certain parts of the world, and there will be those who die tonight because they do not have enough food or adequate shelter.

And it is to our shame that in our so-called civilized society there are those who do not have sufficient to eat and keep warm at the same time this Christmas.

Though as Christians we will do what we can to alleviate such distress, and food banks/credit unions and the like are part of

that compassion, the promise of the Good News about Christ is not primarily about removing poverty and having lots of things and living a comfortable life.

Christianity is not primarily about having a good time. It is about an abundance of spiritual blessings which God bestows on those who choose to involve Him in their lives, a richness that reaches the parts that others cannot reach, having a sense of direction and purpose, knowing we are forgiven, finding who we are, facing death with hope. All that means someone can hear of Jesus Christ and find that even with nothing in worldly terms He is Good News of great joy to them.

Let's be clear what the Good News of Christianity is not about on the one hand and what it is about on the other.

**Not peace on earth, but peace with God;
Not health of body, but health of soul;
Not abundance of material things, but abundance of spiritual blessings.**

But I can hear you say: the question people ask today about Christianity is not so much is it true, important though that is, but does it work, does it live up to its claims, can it sustain careful investigation and survive?

I received an email this week from a church in the diocese where several became Christians last weekend at carol services.



Or there's the story of Tongsin, from the Far East, whose 3 year-old daughter died and he became so tormented by the evil spirits that he lived outside the village and scavenged for food at night. Eventually for his own and other people's protection he had to be put in a cage by his villagers. No-one was able to help him.

A Christian in the neighbourhood heard about him and prayed for him to be made well and whole. And it was not long before he was in his right mind. The villagers couldn't understand the change in him and caged and bound him again, but he prayed and his chains fell off. No-one was any longer in doubt.

And now if you pass his thatched house on a Sunday, you will now hear the sound of praise. He and his family all believe. What is more, between 35–40 other people in the village have come to faith in Jesus Christ in the last three years because of his witness.

**4. The Christian faith is
Good News of great joy
because
Jesus transforms lives.**

Christmas is a moment to stop and hear that Good News, and if we have never downloaded into our system what He has done for us, we can do so today.

The keys to press are **sorry, thank you** and **please** and we'll find the Good News is far more than peace on earth, a healthy body and an abundance of material things. In our lifetime here on earth those blessings may be ours, or they may not, but as the refrain from a contemporary song puts:

'There's no greater thing than knowing Jesus.'

So instead of playing Christmas down and apologizing for it, let's be confident and positive, pointing others to all that God has done, and the difference He makes if we let Him into our lives.

And to Him be all the praise and glory. Amen.