

Christmas day is over and it seems like the build up to the "big day" fizzled out like a punctured balloon! This is the last Sunday of 2020!

The fact we are able to read this together on the last Sunday of the year, is indeed God's blessing for looking after us, taking care, protecting and providing for us through the ups and downs of the year! COVID-19 struck close to home when in November a Baptist Minister and his family in the Oxford area were infected with this virus and his wife was particularly in a bad way.

Today, especially at the end of a difficult year locally, nationally, and globally, we may feel the need for a "joyous Christmas", with cheerful music, colourfully wrapped gifts lovingly given, winter-warming food, and the company of caring people.

As we read familiar passages in Matthew and Luke, we cannot ignore the backdrop of political power that made life difficult for ordinary people.

Mary and Joseph found themselves in a situation not very different from what couples face today. To start with, their love for each other and their faith-fulness to each other was severely tested. Both grappled with the goodness of an upright God. *Why would God take us through such severe testing if He really loved us?*, is one many people ask today.

We might well reflect on terror, anxiety, sickness, oppression and grief felt by so many people around the world who have had to deal with COVID-19. Think of the many who might be thinking, *What was this Christmas all about? Has Jesus really made a difference, a lasting impact on our world today? Maybe Jesus came but couldn't really save us from ourselves, from each other.*

Judging by what we see, hear and read in the news, many are also thinking, *Is Christmas just an excuse for a party, or is it possible to think about the reality of hope and unconditional love and redemption at a time such as this?*

Let's start with the real miracle today, we are reading this because we are alive and all our faculties are working!

Just before He returned to His Father's house, Jesus said, "*be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*"¹ This is a phenomenal statement. It starts with Jesus asking us to, **be sure** of what I am about to tell you; never forget, have no doubt and be absolutely certain of this fact I am about to tell you.

The onus is on us to accept or reject the assurance Jesus gives us. Either decision has very different consequences. To reject this assurance by Jesus, *I don't know if I can accept Jesus' words simply on His request that I do*, is to live life riddled with doubt, and doubt can have disastrous effect.

Who can forget the TV footage of a father calling out to his son on the third floor of a burning building, *Trust me and jump!* Imagine the child battling with doubt, *Should I trust my father? What if I do? What if I don't? What difference will it make?*

Jesus then declares Himself in the words God said to Moses when he asked, "*What shall I tell them (his Hebrew compatriots) when they ask 'Who sent you?'*", to which God replied, *Tell them, I AM sent you!*

Jesus introduces Himself with the same two words, *I AM! My Father and I are One*². *If He is I AM, so am I!*

¹ Matthew 28:20

² John 10:30

Having asked us *never forget, have no doubt and be absolutely certain of this fact I am about to tell you*, Jesus gives us a phenomenal assurance, *I AM with you always! My Father and I are with you always, perpetually, regardless of circumstance, and on every occasion, even to the end of the age.*"

What an assurance!

Shall we take God's assurance with us into the new year? God is with us, at all times, in every situation, under all circumstances!

He was with us through a difficult 2020 and there is no reason to doubt His Presence with us in 2021.

Finally, Jesus says, *I am **WITH** you, always!* He is not behind us watching as we move forward, He is not in front leading the way, nor is He beside us; God is **WITH** us, always!

In the words of the old song, *He walks with me, talks with me, along life's narrow way!*³ He does that because He is with us and has been with us since the beginning of time. Nothing we do, no mistakes we will ever make, no rules we will ever break, can separate us from God. To be in a right relationship is to seek God in all of our lives, no matter how beautiful or how messy our life gets, is the only way that God is **WITH** us to the end.

AMEN

³ "I serve a risen Saviour". Songwriters: Alfred H. Ackley. He Lives lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc.
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Please note:

The Government's Coronavirus page informs us, **This area is in Tier 4: Stay at Home.** Probing further we read,

"Places of worship - You can attend places of worship for a service. However, you must not mingle with anyone outside of your household or support bubble. You should maintain strict social distancing at all times."

We are further advised to "... follow the national guidance on the safe use of places of worship", ... *"In areas subject to Tier 2 ,Tier 3 and Tier 4 restrictions, you must not meet with friends and family indoors in any setting, including a place of worship, unless they are part of your household or support bubble. In Tier 3 and Tier 4 areas, you must also not meet with people outside of your household or support bubble in a private garden or in most outdoor public venues."*

It's all very confusing! While we enjoyed a Christmas Day service at Church, the leadership team prefers we err on the side of caution and **NOT** have worship services in Church, esp as another wave of COVID infection is expected in January.

We will continue to post here until further notice!