

## **Bishop Martyn's Christmas Message 2021 – Full Version**

Oliver Cromwell famously tried to abolish Christmas, it wasn't just Oliver Cromwell of course, the Puritan parliament decreed in 1647 that there were to be no festivities at all around Christmas day. Of course they didn't succeed there were riots on the streets in certain parts of the country, and many simply ignored the government decree. Similarly Lenin in Communist Russia told his secret police that they were to shoot anyone who didn't turn up for work as normal on Christmas day, again they didn't succeed, we know that the underground Church flourished in Communist Russia. More recently in our own times we've had various local authorities supposedly under the name of multiculturalism, who've decreed that we should no longer talk about Christmas but rather it should be a "Winterval" or "Winter Light Festival", thankfully here in Leicester we have a better understanding that actually to celebrate our different cultures means celebrating our different festivals and making sure they are all marked well. So all these attempts to abolish Christmas or do away with in one way or another have failed over the years, and yet it may feel to us now as we come to yet another COVID Christmas that now we have reached the climax of these attempts to abolish Christmas for COVID itself is stopping us from being able to do so many of the things that we want to do to be able to celebrate this season. Yes there can be a real sense of loss, a real sense of grief as many cherished traditions have had to be scaled down or paired right back or even stopped altogether, some are just not confident enough going out and attending their carol services, or Christmas services of one description or another. It may feel as if much has been taken away from us, but my simple invitation to us all this year is to use this as an opportunity to go back to the simplicity of what lies behind all these traditions, and indeed our human desire to celebrate. To go back to that simple story of God came among us, and to remember that when the angels sang their songs, to remember that when the shepherds partied at the news that they received, to remember that when the wise men came and presented their gifts to Mary and Joseph and the newborn baby, all these things were not intended to start particular traditions, rather they were intended to focus our minds on the baby, and what God was doing in the person of Jesus Christ. This then is God with us, "Emmanuel", this then is the Word made flesh come to live among us, this is the reminder that whatever our circumstances God is with us, and just as Jesus later in his life just before he ascended to Heaven was to say to his disciples, "I am with you always, to the end of the age", so the New Testament writers remind us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

These past couple of years have been filled with a sense of loss and grief for so many people. On a personal level many of us have struggled in different ways, professionally many of us have struggled in different ways, we've faced uncertainty, we faced anxiety, so Christmas reminds us of God with us, and reminds us actually that God is not done with the Church yet either. Because the Church is to be the living symbol of God here among us, the "Body of Christ" as we are called here on Earth, now. So even in the changes going on within the Church at the moment, and the sense of loss that can be associated with that some of our cherished traditions perhaps no longer being fulfilled in quite the way they were, it's important to be reminded God is not done with us yet, we are still that living embodiment of Christ here on Earth, a visible sign of God's love always with us. That doesn't mean of course that we don't have to change, yes to be that living sign of God's presence we have to be ready to adapt and to change in different ways, but we need to keep the core of it there secure, that we are to embody God's love through our everyday actions, our everyday words, our everyday living, in all the different contexts of life, this is where we tell others that God is with them, whatever their circumstances. My very simple hope and prayer for you, whatever your circumstances this Christmas, is to think less about what we've lost, and more about what lies behind all these traditions, and to be able to celebrate the core of Christmas. May you know God's peace in your hearts, may you know God's joy whatever your circumstances, and may God's love overflow from

you to all those round about you as you seek to care for them, and to show God's love in action. Thank you for all that you are and for all that you do in the service of Christ and of Christ's Church, thank you.