



Hello. I'm Cherry Vann, Bishop of Monmouth, speaking to you from my home in Newport, South Wales.

We've been saying for some months now that Christmas is going to be different this year, and so it is. Even more different than we were expecting only a week or so ago. Certainly here, in Wales, the lockdown is firmly in place and any meeting up to celebrate the season now limited to just Christmas Day itself.

Alongside the disappointment of not being able to see family and the frustration of thwarted plans, is a growing anxiety, perhaps even fear. The virus continues to spread at an alarming rate and although vaccines are being rolled out, we're facing yet more months of ongoing restrictions. Getting back to the normal that was, still seems a long way off.

One of the striking things about the Christmas story is the number of times that the various characters are told not to be afraid. The angel who visits Mary with the bewildering news that she is to bear a son, says to her, *'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.'* Just as Joseph is about to divorce Mary quietly, an angel appears to him too, in a dream, and says, *'Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.'* And the shepherds, similarly, terrified at seeing an angel appear to them in the night sky, are told, *'Do not be afraid, for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.'*

Those words are as true for us today as they were on that first Christmas Day. Do not be afraid. However bewildered and confused you may be feeling. However concerned you are about the future. Do not be afraid. Because however much our Christmas celebrations have been cancelled, postponed, put on hold, the truth at the heart of Christmas still stands and it will hold true whatever our circumstances. It is, as the angel told the shepherds, good news of great joy for all the people. For to you is born this day a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

Christ comes to us today, as he did 2,000 years ago - into the ordinariness of life, with all its hardships and messiness, its uncertainties and insecurities. Christ is here with us, in the suffering and the weariness of it all, as much he is in the love and joy of family and friends that we long to be with. We must be careful and sensible, yes. We must take seriously the restrictions that are in place for everyone's safety, of course. But we need have no fear. For Christ, the babe born in a manger that first Christmas Day, is Emmanuel, God with us, always and everywhere.

Wherever you are and however you'll be spending Christmas this year, may you know the joy of the angels and the peace of the Christ Child deep within your heart.