

Christmas Sermon 2020: Loved forever, and headed for glory.

Back in January, I turned on the news one morning to hear that the United States had assassinated a top Iranian General in Baghdad. Qasem Soleimani was the commander of the Revolutionary Guard, as big a fish as they come in the Iranian military and government, and the Americans blew him to bits. It seemed astonishingly dangerous. I bought the newspaper, as I do on days that I think are going to prove truly historic. It seemed to me – and in fairness, to many – that a major war was pretty much inevitable.

Who remembers Soleimani now? By April he was completely forgotten. The world had coronavirus. We didn't have room to think about anything else: the Middle East, climate change, Brexit, all of it just took a back seat. Our world was dominated by that little spiky bug. We put locks on the park gates, told people they couldn't sit on benches, closed the schools, locked the churches, shut down businesses, washed hands, banged pans and of course, some of us, wept and grieved for loved ones lost. We kept an eye on that grim daily figure. Seven hundred dead. Five hundred. Nine hundred. We argued about PPE and Sweden and school meals. We watched and waited for the vaccines, hardly dared to believe it when they were suddenly here, felt a brief moment of elation, only to come crashing down again when they told of us the mutation, of the new threat, and the new tiers.

And here we are: masked, distanced, not allowed to sing. All of us, aren't we, just *tired* – so, so tired and battered. It has been a very, very difficult year. As you can imagine, I toyed with stronger ways of putting that, but the most obvious were not appropriate for the pulpit. I don't suppose any of us will look back on 2020 with much fondness. The sooner this plague year is behind us, the better.

Plague year. It's a striking phrase, but even using it prompts a thought. 2020 has been bad. For some, devastating. However, collectively, we do need a sense of perspective. The real plague years of the fourteenth century killed more than a third of Europe's population. And even this year, when we have been obsessed with corona, malaria has killed far, far more people. Mostly small, poor children in Sub-Saharan Africa, in their ten and hundreds of thousands. *That's* a plague. It would be good, would it not, if we could put the same collective effort in ending malaria, as we have into corona.

It would, however, be a fairly rubbish Christmas sermon which told you that hey, things have been bad, but you mustn't complain, because they've been worse once, and still are for other people. Stop your grumbling, feel bad for others, and help them. That's not bad moral advice, but it is a truly awful Christmas sermon. The Gospel is not moral advice. The Gospel does not tell you how you must feel, or how you must act. It tells you instead what you are, and what God has done. It doesn't nag you to do better. It tells you, instead, what's really true.

What's really true? Well, says the Gospel, that this world, and your existence, is not some great big accident. You are not the end product of mindless physical reactions. You're not a *thing*. You're a child. A beloved child of the God who made everything. You are *wanted*. You are *meant* to be here. You were created out of love, and everything about you was meant to shine with that love. And when it all went wrong, when evil and sickness and death threatened to thwart everything, then, in the fullness of time, God sent his Son. God sent his Son so there would, at last, be one human life lived as it was meant to be. One human life which rang true, one human life that was love and only love. One human life in which there was no gone-wrongness at all.

And, then, says the Gospel, the great mystery: that one life broke itself open. He went onto the Cross so that He wouldn't be just *one*. He went there, that instead, he might be shared. That his broken life might flow into each and everyone of us. That his one life, full of grace and truth, as John's Gospel says, would no longer be just private. He'd be with us. He'd be *in* us. And all our evil and sickness and death would be caught up in Him, healed and turned around. What was falling apart would be put back together again. What was doomed to die, would be restored to life. Because of His one life, given to us - given for us - we, and the whole world, are enveloped in love, and ransomed for glory. *That's* the Gospel. It's not good advice. It's the most vital word of truth ever: *you're loved. And because of this one life, and death, and resurrection, because of Jesus of Nazareth, you are loved forever and headed for glory.*

Loved forever, and headed for glory. Human beings are not rubbish. We're not just chemical scum, as Stephen Hawking once charmingly put it. We are loved forever, and headed for glory. That's why we celebrate Christmas. It's why we have to look after each other, why those children with malaria matter. Matter infinitely. Loved forever, and headed for glory. No virus, no nothing, can ever take that away from us. Loved forever, and headed for glory. Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

AMEN!