

Christmas Carol Service Reflection 2020

Could we dare to dream, or have faith enough to believe that God could be doing something different in our experience of 2020? *See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light; can you see it?*” We hear the prophet Isaiah say this evening to a people long ago whose world, like ours, was turned upside down.

This has been a tough, terrible and tragic year. A year full of losses – of loved ones; missed milestones; cancelled celebrations. But could God have been doing something different in our experience this year? Could we find some silver linings in this lingering Covid-cloud?

Quality time spent with family: Commuters discovered the freshness of family life According to a survey, 90 per cent of Irish teenagers, said they valued their family life more now than they did before the pandemic, people re-evaluated what they are doing with their lives, discovered the outdoors, got personal priorities in order. The world slowed down; Mother Nature caught her breath.

The pull and push of this pandemic year proved we can suddenly have a single-tier health system; we don't have to evict people in trouble with mortgage or rent payments. It only took a week to provide a universal living wage for over four hundred thousand people unexpectedly unemployed. What we were told was unachievable and unrealistic, became possible; was God's new deed unfolding?

Did God's light not shine through the *real heroes*: unassuming stars who gave themselves in order to serve others: front line workers, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, transport workers, volunteers and so very many others who have understood that no one can be saved alone.

The paradox of new deeds: pulling together to stay apart; mind-boggling gestures of solidarity – masks, glass partitions, latex gloves, and virtual hugs – gifted to us by a young dreamer (Adam King). The possibility of silver linings is not meant to discount the immense suffering and hardship of recent events; it's simply meant to help us rise our heads from the rubble and retrieve some possible deeper significance; to read the signs of the times.

As St Paul says to us this evening: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him”. God can generate good out of even terrible and tragic circumstances. In light of this eternal truth, that all is not lost. Can even these difficult and disorientating last number of months be a redemptive seedbed and fertile soil for God to work in? These silver linings allow hope and resilience to override the uncertainty and anguish that sought to overwhelm us in the dark days – the Tenebrae – of this year.

Is it possible to trust that *God* is, as Isaiah says, *doing a new deed*? Can our world and each of us come out of this crisis better? What kind of life do we want after Covid-19? Each of us must answer that question for ourselves!

But if we could break free from the gravitational pull of a return to business as usual we could find redemption through our experience of 2020. Not only in relation to housing and health care, the universal wage, climate change; but also for our personal, family, and community life. The challenge is to resist the temptation to go back to the old normal.

Joseph is in turmoil in this evening's Gospel, he considers going back on his promise to marry Mary. He was at the edge of scandal, a paternity crisis; he is anxious, fearful, important details but not the point. The real story, the breaking newness of the Christmas story is that the baby is from the Holy Spirit, and that newness comes when God's Spirit stirs among

us: new deeds, fresh vision, daring dreams, can stir up when God's Spirit is let loose.

Friends, when our world is weary and shut down; when we are tempted to cling on to what was once secure and familiar but exposed by this pandemic as already sick, broken, unfair; the breaking newness of this evening's Gospel story is that God's Spirit begins something new, fresh, hopeful in moments of crisis, anxiety and uncertainty. Joseph learned this.

These last few month God's Spirit has stirred something utterly new among us: a new solidarity, neighbourliness, civic responsibility, and volunteerism. The stirrings of a new more profound and precious appreciation that we are all brothers and sisters – *Tutti Fratelli* as Pope Francis challenged us to remember this year. All of us entrusted with a common responsibility to build a more radically just economy and to save our ailing world because we now know more than ever, no one can be saved alone. That would be a silver lining worth treasuring this Christmas!

“See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light, can you see it?”
Could the stirrings of a new normal be God's gift to us this year?

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