

Christmas — 25th December 2021

'Let the heavens rain down the Just One'

This year, thank God, it's not quite a 'cancelled Christmas' — not as much as last year, anyway, but I'm sure that you, like I, have had your fair share of 'cancellations' even so, this season ... not all, for me, Covid-related, but mostly: drinks at friends' last Thursday; my sister's travelling to my parents; lunch with a friend next Tuesday.

I tell you what also got cancelled — well, not cancelled actually, but just deferred from Christmas Eve to (hopefully), Christmas Day today — and that was the launch of the latest 'giant leap for mankind' into space, in the shape of a new space telescope (the '[James Webb Space Telescope](#)'): this is the culmination of 30yrs' work, and \$10bn investment! It's the successor to the Hubble Space Telescope, now 30yrs old, which has revolutionized the pictures we see of outer space and the heavenly bodies. The JWST's launch on Christmas Day reminded me of the early days of the Space Race, when the US and USSR were vying for supremacy in getting to the moon. On Christmas Eve 1968, the Apollo 8 astronauts issued a message to all

humanity from their lunar orbit, and the text they used was the beginning of Genesis, including the words, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light!* Out there in space, looking back at the earth at Christmas, their thoughts could not but turn to the God of Creation, His goodness, His plan of love, and His redemption in Christ. Their uplifting words still have the power to thrill, broadcast across space 53yrs ago. I think that we all have the likelihood, when we look up at the night sky, or think about the vastness of space, to be uplifted by the grandeur of it, and to be absorbed in thoughts of the Lord's great care for creation, and in particular for us. It's a lovely coincidence, then, that after 30yrs' preparation, mankind's next great space project, the JWST, though cancelled in its launch yesterday, goes into orbit today, Christmas Day, when much of humanity is focussed on the stupendous gift of God's love for us.

For, no matter any cancellations in our earthly calendars, social lives, or technical diaries, what *really*

matters about Christmas — celebrating the coming of the Christ child, the Son of God, into (t)His world — can never be cancelled. Yes, of course our keeping of Christmas has its important outward ceremonies, and we most long to share such rituals, both sacred and secular, with others — and Covid can wreak some havoc with all that, as we have discovered for 2 yrs in a row! — but the innermost essence of Christmas takes place ultimately, in the *hearts* of those with faith. Nothing, and no-one, can cancel the sacred coming of Christ into our souls: “*the Word became flesh,*” St John tells us in this Christmas-morning Gospel, “*He lived amongst us, and we saw His glory ... To all who did accept Him, He gave power to become children of God.*”

The God of all grandeur, who flung stars into space, is the same God who chooses to come to this little planet earth and reveal Himself in the tiny child Jesus. This tremendous mystery — that no-one could have invented, and only God could have planned — is the heart of Christmas, and reaches into the hearts of much of

humanity, even if so many don't then allow themselves to be touched more deeply by the life-changing significance of it. “*But to all who did accept Him, He gave power to become children of God!*” This promise, the Gospel uttered by God the Word as He became flesh, is never cancelled; it holds good for all humanity and for all history, but we do therefore have to accept Him.

However we are keeping Christmas this year — however simply, or unusually, maybe not with loved ones, or not in as big a celebration as usual — let's be assured that the love of God for us is always just as rich and lavish for us. That first Christmas was simple, anyway, wasn't it? — just a cave dwelling, a stable perhaps with animals, and the new-born Son of God laid in a manger, an animal trough. But its rustic simplicity, its bareness, even, took away nothing of its wonder: God had become man; God *has* become man! The difference between simple 1st-c. Bethlehem, where Mary and Joseph sought refuge in an animal house, and the complex 21st-c. global village where we are co-operating as humanity on vaccinating the world

population, and putting awesome space telescopes into orbit, actually makes no difference when it comes to things of the spirit. 20 centuries have elapsed, and man's technical mastery seems in the ascendant, but his spiritual needs remain just as acute: we need Jesus Christ to reveal to us our purpose in the universe; we need Jesus Christ to save us from our sinfulness.

As we gaze across at our little Newman House crib scene, and take in the simplicity of it, let's ask the Lord to bless our simple Christmas with love and inner joy. How blessed we are to profess, openly, and with much joy, our faith in Jesus Christ. How can we not rejoice — even if we are on our own today, or reaching out to family by FaceTime or video link — that He has come to save us? Let's show our joy this day, let's be marked out as Christians on this holy festival above all by how we reach out to one another, how we treat and speak to one another, how we endeavour to imitate the morals and manners of the God-made-man Christ child. Let our 'Happy Christmas' to each other express truly what God has

brought into the world through the Christmas mystery, the 'uncancellable' peace and joy of knowing that 'God is with us.'

