

At Christmas 1914 soldiers took the risk, crossed a battle-line and kindled an evening of friendship and football. It is the moment all have picked on this year, whether in adverts or sermons. The truce illustrates something of the heart of Christmas, whereby God sends his Son, that vulnerable sign of peace, to a weary war-torn world. The problem is that the way it is told now it seems to end with a 'happy ever after'.

Of course we like Christmas stories with happy endings: singing carols, swapping photos, shaking hands, sharing chocolate, but the following day the war continued with the same severity. Nothing had changed; it was a one-day wonder. That is not the world in which we live - truces are rare.

Disease does not have any truce. Last week I was in Sierra Leone to meet faith leaders struggling with a plague that has spread across three countries. But Ebola will be as virulent today as it was yesterday, crossing boundaries defiantly. It will be beaten by those courageous people treating and working, both locals and many from this country, but the struggle is hard.

Today there is no Christmas truce in the Middle East, or in north-east Nigeria where Christians are persecuted, with other minorities. The tension in the ancient lands of Jesus' birth rises by the day. Fear does not have a truce, nor the animosity and hatred whose tangible outcome is increasing separation between Israeli and Palestinian.

The Christmas story could be told simply with a happy ending where the gospel reading ended. 'Shepherds are cold, shepherds see angels, shepherds head into town and see baby, and shepherds disappear into sunrise, happy'. If we end there, Christmas removes us from reality. Christmas becomes something utterly remote, about lives entirely different, fictional, naïve, tidy. That's not Christmas. Jesus came to the reality of this world to transform that reality - not to take us into some fantasy kind of 'happy ever after' but to 'Good News of great joy for all people.'

It is Good News precisely because God addresses the world as it is. Isaiah speaks of warriors and garments rolled in blood, of yokes on people's shoulders, of oppression. We know that story; it is the lived reality of so many suffering today. Yet Isaiah announces the news of God bringing light, joy, and exultation, through a child!

It is 'good news of great joy' because a helpless baby (who is God) becomes the one who changes this world decisively. Differently to any other figure in human history Jesus breaks in, not to help us escape, but to transform and take hold of our past, our present and our future. This baby brings the promise of forgiveness, the certainty of love and the hope of peace.

This means that whilst we must truly face the state of the world to which Jesus came, we can - we must - be equally realistic about the difference he makes.

Jesus did not come for one day. Jesus changed things for ever.

He comes to the person who turns and calls to him, bringing forgiveness and new life. That is an offer to all of us today, whether full of the joy of Christmas or in the midst of a personal darkness of despair and hopelessness. If Jesus can be laid in a manger there is nowhere that is not fitting for him to come, no person who is unfit to receive him.

He comes to the person nearing death, whether that death is premature or after a long life, and he brings the assurance of his presence, and the hope of eternity. Jesus is the promise that 'God is with us', no matter what.

To the region caught up in war or to the family caught up in fights, he offers a transformation of hearts so there might be reconciliation. He offers a stepping out of the trenches, away from positions taken against enemies – and into new paths of relating.

He comes to lives that can too easily get caught up in acquiring, amassing, consuming and self-obsessing, bringing a shift in our horizon – beyond ourselves, to those who don't have what we have. If we hear this story properly we look away from ourselves, from our life with its care and burdens. This is freedom: as our perspective widens, so we are healed. This is good news of great joy for all people. The epistle to Titus describes his impact, the creation of people and communities that live out the reality of the love of God in Christ.

Yet because Jesus comes as child, as baby, we are not manipulated or forced, we have freedom to choose whether to hear his story properly or not. This baby is love so fierce it changes universes, love so gentle that the weakest is free to choose.

Rowan Williams puts it beautifully in his poem 'Advent Calendar',

*'He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.'*

Jesus does not remove us from reality, he indwells it; and he indwells us if we invite him. To be indwelt by Christ changes our understanding of reality, so that with his eyes we may see the world and love it, overflowing with the love that he gives to us.

Last week I saw a young woman named Monica near Freetown [in Sierra Leone], teaching a group of Ebola orphans to sing about Jesus building community. Her face, her manner, her pragmatic Christ-likeness is before me in my mind as I remember. That is the impact of the baby in the manger, the impact of the one who reaches out to us and brings not a day-long truce but permanent peace with God, not escapism but to a call to be a Church community of those who change the world in which we live.

What an extraordinary God this is who makes all the difference in the world. Don't we all long for his reality rather than our make believe? The question is whether we will have open hands and ears, hearts and lives to receive him, not just on Christmas, but each day of our lives.

More than that, having received him, whether we will make it our life's aim - like the shepherds - for the sake of his world to be the difference Jesus came to bring.

Jesus is no mere 24-hour truce: he is joy forever.

Archbishop of Canterbury, J Welby 2014