Bishop Gregory's Advent Message 2020

When I spoke to you in my Advent message last year, my message was one based upon hope; the idea that Jesus says to us that when things are going wrong or are difficult we should lift up our heads and look to see where God is at work amongst us.

I couldn't have imaged then, none of us could have imagined, what was ahead of us in 2020 and the fact that this year has been dominated by the virus almost to the exclusion of everything else. It's amazing even Brexit has taken a back seat to the way in which we have responded to the virus.

My first thoughts go to all those who have suffered because of the virus. Those who have died or those who have lost family members. Those who have found themselves almost imprisoned in their own homes or through fear because none of us can truthfully know what is around the corner. And yet, our diocese has survived, has been resilient in the face of this crisis. Mission Areas have rallied around. The different levels of the church, Mission Area Diocese and Province have worked together to overcome the difficulties set before us. Clergy have been amazingly inventive on online worship and finding new ways with their congregations to look after those who need care or those who are needy of a good meal or friendly support at a time like this. I am proud of what the Teulu Asaph has achieved and thank you for the part you have played.

Now we come to Advent and then to Christmas. It's almost certain this Christmas will be a Christmas like no other when all the usual plans have to be set aside. Maybe our family won't be joining us this year; maybe we won't be able to do what we usually do and keep those family traditions. And church will be very different as well. We won't be able to fill the church for the midnight mass or for the carol service or Christingle this year. And that may make you very sad indeed.

I want to return to the theme of hope, and I want to return to the good news that Christmas gives us; of a God who loves us and a God who is on our side. I want to return to the message of

Christmas, that says when the baby was born in Bethlehem God came to live amongst us and that He promised that He would remain amongst us to encourage, to inspire, to build a future. And that means that as a church, as the people of God, as those who believe and follow Jesus, that we want to be this Christmas, people of light. People who in the midst of the darkness will bring hope and love and joy and peace to those whom we encounter. And yes, we won't be able to do it in the usual way. We won't just be able to invite people in and sing with them or preach to them. We shall have to find new ways of getting our message across, of going out of way to deliver goodness to people's homes even those we can't spend time with them. We shall have to find new ways of passing on the gift of peace that comes at Christmas.

I know from the conversations I have had with many of the clergy and with many of the Mission Areas that there are a host of creative ideas out there, new ways of planting the message of Christmas. And I think that's the challenge of us for this Advent: Not to do as we've always done but to think about how by gesture, by action, by online worship, by passing the message on, we can impart the message that God is on our side, that God has been born in the world for us, in a new way.

And it will be my prayer for you in our churches that that the spirit of God may touch you, may speak to you, may inspire you. may support you so that as we go through Christmas and face 2021 (and goodness knows what challenges that year may bring), so as go through Christmas and come to that new year we will know that we carry with us the hope of a saviour who loves us and the love of a God who serves us.

May God be with you this Advent and Christmas. Amen.