

Transcript of Bishop Anne's Christmas message 2023

You've just been listening to a new setting of the well-loved carol *The First Nowell*, which the Church of England commissioned this year from the acclaimed composer, Bob Chilcott, as part of the invitation to "Follow the Star and Join the Song".

Carols and Christmas go together. Most people have their favourite carol whether or not they go to church. The familiar tunes and sometimes ancient words, put us in touch with something of the true spirit of Christmas. If you've been following our own Church of England Birmingham social media postings on "Carols Unwrapped", you will have been discovering some of the meaning behind the deeply evocative-sounding lyrics.

But however, much we try and get to the real meaning of Christmas, there always remains a mystery that invites us not to consider it from a distance, but to enter in. It's a bit like the difference between trying to explain to someone how powerful a piece of music is, or what happens when human voices join together in song, and that person actually *experiencing* this for themselves. And something *does* happen when human beings come together to sing. Many testify to the benefits of physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing of joining a choir or singing group. There is a power for good when we join together in this way.

One of the most moving stories of human voices joining in song is of the events of Christmas Eve 1914 when during the early months of WW1, along the trenches of the Western Front, British, French and Belgian soldiers, joined with German one, joined with those who were the enemy, in singing Christmas carols, and amongst them - Silent Night. The peace was sadly short lived, but it is a powerful story of how the beauty of human voices singing in harmony, momentarily overcame the dreadfulness of war.

This Christmas, we are aware of many conflicts in our own world today - whether in Gaza and Israel, the Ukraine, or in many other places - indeed conflicts of many kinds closer to home and in which we may find ourselves embroiled. The invitation of the Christmas angels is still to join the song - the song of the one who first sang creation into being, the song of the one who loved the world so much that he came in Jesus Christ to draw us back to the ways of love, compassion, justice and peace.

I hope you will this Christmas discover again the joy of joining your voice to the voices of many others in singing your favourite carols. Our churches will be full of such singing and a warm welcome awaits. But more than this, I invite you to listen for the song of the angels, for the voice of the holy one who calls us all to enter the mystery, to open our hearts to the love that is born at Christmas, to be caught up in the harmony that is filled with God's presence, and to join the song for peace in our world. If we fear this peace is out of reach, may we take courage from the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"for a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, Prince of peace".

May I wish you a song-filled, hope-filled, peace-filled Christmas.

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