

Archbishop Anne's Christmas Sermon

In the Year of our Lord 2020

Let us be joyful in spite of everything.

Dear people of God,

As I was writing these words I was imagining you in your homes this Christmas - alone, or perhaps with one or two close family or friends from your bubble nearby.

I was imagining lovingly decorated Christmas trees with gifts underneath them waiting to be opened.

I was imagining smells of turkey roasting in the oven, and the sight of freshly baked shortbread on the counter, with Christmas carols playing in the background.

Most of all I was imagining you as an Advent people filled with hope and expectation and with hearts full of Christmas light and love.

Perhaps these cozy Christmas scenes are nothing close to your lived reality this year. If this is the case then I pray that the Lord will give me the tongue of a teacher that I may sustain the weary with a word.¹

So here goes....

On December 10th, in the year of our Lord 1943 Maria von Wedemeyer wrote a love letter to her new fiancé Dietrich Bonhoeffer which he received and read from his 7X10 room - Cell number 92 in Tegel Prison, Germany.

Let me describe that cell to you. In it was a plank bed, a bench along one wall, a stool, a necessary bucket, a wooden door with a tiny circular window through which the guards might observe him, and a not so small window above his head providing daylight and fresh air.

Around about him in the cell were a few personal items he'd requested from home - slippers, shoe polish, writing paper and envelopes, ink, sewing

things, pictures of his favourite works of art, letters he'd already received from Maria, from his family and friends.

A suit hung on a peg for the day he went to trial.

The centrepiece during his first Christmas at Tegel was an Advent wreath Maria had sent him.

She'd actually sent him a Christmas tree but it was too big to have in his cell so the guards kept it in theirs.²

That year the darkness that was all around was a world at war with no end in sight. Death, hunger, fear, grief, loss, hung heavy in the air.

Maria's thoughts and prayers for her love are mine for you and for all of us this Christmastime as the world fights a very different war in the year of our Lord 2020 under the shadow of the Covid 19 pandemic.

This is what she wrote:

"And now Christmas is coming and you won't be there.

We shall be apart, yes, but very close together.

My thoughts will come to you and accompany you.

We shall sing "Peace on Earth" and pray together, but we shall sing "Glory be to God on high" even louder.

*That is what I pray for you and for all of us, that the Saviour may throw open the gates of heaven for us at darkest night on Christmas Eve, so that we can be joyful in spite of everything."*³

What words of courage, of inner strength, of resolve, of prayer, of hope wrapped in love for her Dietrich to receive.

I bet he held on to those words for days.

I bet the paper they were written on became quite yellowed from overreading in the same way his bible was worn from being constantly read.

Dietrich feasted on the words in Holy Scripture, reading it for hours every day. By November of his first year at Tegel Prison he'd read through the OT two and a half times.

He made it a regular practice to pray the Psalms and a daily practice of interceding for his friends and relatives who were on the front lines or in concentration camps.

Like us, Maria and Dietrich were Advent people living in expectation for the coming reign God's kingdom described so well to us by the prophet Isaiah as one of 'endless peace' where justice and righteousness would be established forevermore.

Their lives were deeply rooted in their belief and faith in Jesus Christ. That meant that the war raging on was of secondary importance. Because their Saviour had opened the doors of heaven to them in the moment of their baptism they lived with a posture of hope, of confidence and in real joy.

What did he think of that letter? On December 13th, 1943 Dietrich wrote these words in return to his fiancée Maria.

"Be brave for my sake, dearest Maria, even if this letter is your only token of my love this Christmas - tide. We shall both experience a few dark hours - why should we disguise that from each other.

*Then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succour in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives."*⁴

God is in the manger.

God became human.

The First Nations version says it in this way: "Creator's Word became a flesh and blood human being and pitched his sacred tent among us living as one of us."⁵

This is the truth filled mystery and wonder of Christmas.

The gift of salvation comes to us through the birth of a divine child named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This is the birth we celebrate today. This is the baby whose preaching, healing and resurrection would transform the world.

In Luke's imagination power does not dwell in the hands of the world's richest or most powerful leaders but in the cry of a newborn, the exhausted tears of a new mother, the hopes of a young family witnessing new life.

Some seven hundred years before his birth a prophet so immersed in God's thought and counsel saw it all so clearly; as if he himself were standing in front of the manger.

"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us." (Isaiah 9.6)

The meaning and the message of Christmas is so simple.

A child. Born for us. Given to us.

What is our response to the mystery and the wonder of this gift?

To get up from whatever we are doing and go with haste as the did shepherds to the Bethlehem of our life and to kneel before the Child lying in a manger.

It is to offer our worship and our praise and to sing with the choirs of angels – "Glory to God in the highest heavens and peace to all people on earth."

It is to be like the Magi in offering the very best gifts we have –our gold, frankincense and myrrh - gifts that are costly, given in love. It is to discover when we are about to go back to our old lives that we actually left them on the hay in front of the baby; that our hearts have been forever changed by Him so we return home by another route....away from the power hungry Herods of this world.

It is to be like Mary and treasure the precious gift of this Christmas and to ponder its meaning in the shadow of Covid 19.

If we can do those few things this Christmas, perhaps like Maria and Dietrich we will discover that we are not alone when the world seems to be spinning out of control and where way too many people have opted for fear and anxiety over hope.

And if people like Mary and Joseph, and Maria and Dietrich can believe that we are not alone in such a world we can be 'bold and prophetic and courageous'⁶ even when we are told to be quiet or people fearful of our good news.

Then like Jesus we can cry out from the safety of a mother's arms into the darkness of this world, knowing that God's light is already shining over us.

And like Mary we can hold the baby in our arms; knowing what the future holds for him, yet trusting that even at the end family and friends will be there for us, as they were for Him.

If we can do all this then "*the Saviour will throw open the gates of heaven for us at darkest night on Christmas Eve, so that we can be joyful in spite of everything.*" (Wedermeier)

One of the official prison chaplains at Tegel, Harald Poelchau asked Bonhoeffer to write a prayer for Christmas day that could be distributed to all the other prisoners. I close with it praying that in these anxious times we are reminded that we are never alone:

O God,

Early in the morning do I cry unto thee.

Help me to pray.

And to think only of thee.

I cannot pray alone.

In me there is darkness,

But with thee there is light.

I am lonely, but thou leavest me not.

I am feeble in heart but thou leavest me not.

I am restless, but with thee there is peace.

In me there is bitterness, but with thee there is patience,

Thy ways are past understanding, but thou knowest the way for me.⁷

Amen

(Bonhoeffer: Eric Metaxas)

May the God who knows all of our ways and loves us infinitely bless,
preserve and keep you in God's love this Christmas and always.

+Anne

1. Isaiah 50.4
2. The description of Bonhoeffer's Cell at Tegel prison can be found in Eric Metaxas book – *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. Thomas Nelson. 2010 (page 439)
3. From *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2010)
4. From *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.(2010)
5. *Walking the Good Road: The Gospels and Acts*. First Nations Version (2017)
6. *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* Ed. Joel Green; Thomas Long, Luke Powery, Cynthia Rigby. Carolyn Sharp. WJK (2020)
7. As 2. Above.

