

## Christmas Morning 2016

2016 has been a year to remember, which can probably be summed up in two words, BREXIT and TRUMP! Arguably, these two phenomena have created a climate of considerable uncertainty, and not a little unease. Last week it was estimated by the British Ambassador in Brussels, Sir Ivan Rogers, that it could take ten years to achieve all that is entailed in a withdrawal from the EU, which is hardly what anyone would have anticipated or wished for.... On the other side of the pond, Donald Trump's successive choices of senior colleagues for his new administration, summarised very helpfully by the Daily Telegraph Foreign Staff under "Who's who in DT's new administration", do not fill one with confidence for the future – for international relations (Iran), domestic politics (immigration and health care) or the planet. There are reasons not to be very cheerful.

However, there were reasons not to be very cheerful in the year of Jesus' birth. Heavy Roman imperial rule was well established. The proxy royal house of the Herodians was exercising close tight control. In already straightened circumstances, the Emperor Augustus then announces a census requiring everyone to return to their birthplace to register, heralding further punitive taxes. We know also from Matthew's gospel that Herod was eager to see off any perceived threats to his power and influence, which leads to the holy family becoming refugees in Egypt....

*What stands out in the gospel story, therefore,* is the extraordinary rising up of hope and promise in the star-studded birth of a Saviour in Bethlehem. "Do not be afraid," declares the angel on the hillside, "for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people!" When the shepherds hear this, these low paid night workers, probably on zero hours contracts, who in all likelihood will have known the experience of in-work poverty (along with the 13.5 million people in this country) all rush down to Bethlehem together to see this thing which has come to pass. And they are not disappointed! And so this *good-news message on the hillside* brings into focus the wonderful way in which the life and ministry of Jesus was to be orientated irrepressibly towards the resurgence of hope and potential and enterprise and confidence and creativity – what Luke describes in Mary's song as the lifting up of the poor and the bringing down of the mighty. The child of Bethlehem, born into the trauma of imperial oppression, comes

right into the mess of it all and lives the promise! Christmas, therefore, is more than any other time, a season to be deeply hopeful, to look up, look out and get out there! We are to live the promise for our own villages, towns and cities here and now, in the power of the Saviour!

In the spirit of living for the resurgence of hope, I want to share with you my three heroes of hope for 2016. My first hero has to be David Attenborough! Hands up if you have seen an episode of Planet Earth 2?! That puts you and me among the staggering 12 million Sunday night viewers who have enjoyed such gripping entertainment. In an article in the Radio Times recently David Attenborough wrote that the chief feature of this last series was that this time we saw the world from the animal's point of view. Remote cameras enabled this to be achieved in a quite remarkable way. We've even got right up close to one of the world's rarest creatures, the snow leopard. And as for the snakes on the beach, I never would have thought that I could feel such empathy with an ugly iguana fleeing up the rocks for its life!! At 90 years of age, David Attenborough has once again delivered up to us a stunning testimony to the beauty and wonder and ingenuity of the natural world. Of the many things I admire about him and his team, the thing that strikes me most is that as someone who knows more than anyone how great are the threats to the balance of nature and to global environmental equilibrium, he still continues to gently, but purposefully and persuasively remind us of the beauty and fragility of islands, deserts, mountains, oceans, forests and even cities – as though to say, this is what we are risking every hour of every day if we don't plan and act appropriately. His hope is, I think, that one day, preferably one day soon, we will indeed actually live differently – live differently, plan differently and do things differently. And, arguably, we have reached a position of significant political advantage. After the Paris Agreement of a year ago to reduce the rate of increase in global temperature and achieve 'climate-neutrality' by the end of the century, and after the consensus in Kigali in September this year to control HFC (hydroflourocarbon) emissions worldwide on an agreed sliding scale – negotiated painstakingly by John Kerry – there is real hope. David Attenborough would not perhaps be described as a political or even environmental activist; he's a naturalist. Yet the effect of what he has done is undoubtedly in my view subversive. He's my first hero of hope because he doesn't give up on the planet and he doesn't give up on us, and he is not going to let us off the hook!

My second hero of hope for 2016 is a good friend of mine. His name is Bishop Cleophas Lunga, Bishop of Matabeleland in southern Zimbabwe. Coincidentally, a former vicar of St George's, James Hughes (my predecessor x N) left here to be the *first* bishop of Matabeleland just 60 years ago. As some of you know I have taken up a new role in relation to the Anglican Diocese of Matabeleland as 'Commissary' to the Diocese. This means being a UK representative for the interests of the diocese. On my visit to the diocese in April this year, one thing struck me forcefully, which was the *key role of the bishop in leading development at a grass roots level*. The diocese owns a number of farms which over the years have fallen out of use. When Bishop Cleophas took over six years ago, he set about getting them back into cultivation, and this process continues. One associated part of his oversight is a responsibility for ensuring that poorer parishes, in the rural areas, get enough grain to survive. In years of plenty the rural economy is self-supporting. In other circumstances, such as the recent impact of the el Nino-induced drought this last year, supplying grain to these parishes takes on great urgency. The principle staple crop that failed was maize, with devastating effects. In some areas, including on diocesan farms, sorghum has been planted instead, which has greater drought resistance properties. This has been used to offset the maize shortages and to help supply much-needed grain to the hardest hit rural parishes. In addition to these necessary short term measures, Bishop Cleophas is pioneering a diversification of crop production for the longer term through planting experimental plots with alternative crops. One of these is the drought-resistant grain-producing cereal 'amaranth'. Amaranth is found here in the UK, of course, and goes under the intriguing name of 'Love-lies-bleeding'. In Greek, amaranth means 'everlasting' – so may it indeed be! For the interest of porridge lovers, it produces seeds which contain even more protein than oats, and a wide range of nutrients including Iron, Calcium, Vitamin B, Magnesium and Zinc. It is apparently available in Waitrose! Its potential to be a significant contributor as a primary source of protein and carbohydrate in the Zimbabwean context is very exciting, especially given the nutritional challenges being faced. Bishop Cleophas, then, is my second hero of hope because not only is he doing what his role demands, which is to ensure the basic subsistence of the very poor in the outlying, vulnerable parishes, but he is trail-blazing a path to a more

secure and sustainable future. We hope and pray that from these small beginnings on the experimental plots great things will follow.

My third hero of hope is a local person who will possibly be known to some of us. Her name is Patricia White. Over the past nine months she has been setting up a project in Ladywood, with others, called 'Suited for Success'. The aim of the project is to work with people seeking employment, to enhance their chances of success. This is done in a very practical way, by supplying suits for wearing at interview – 'suited for success' – and giving advice on employability. The premises that have been secured down by Tesco's Springhill, above the Rooster Chicken outlet, are now stocked with a wide range of suits, shoes and accessories that will be available for the first clients accessing the project from January 2017. Each client will have a coach and a mentor. To start with, the centre will be open on Thursdays and Fridays until more funding comes in. If you want to know more, there are some A4 sheets at the back of church to take away or you can 'Google' 'Suited for Success'. The Ladywood constituency has the highest unemployment rate in Birmingham of 11.4%. Already professional and corporate sectors in the city are supporting the project. Additional prayer, support and suits and accessories will of course continue to be very necessary and very welcome. Patricia is my third hero of hope because the challenge of employment and employability is absolutely critical for our city and this locality, especially as we are the youngest city in Europe. And Suited for Success is attempting to equip and empower clients with significant personal barriers in gaining employment such as ex-offenders, the long-term unemployed, homeless people and individuals affected by substance misuse. They are aiming very high. We wish the project very well and I hope there may be ways we can support Patricia and her staff and volunteers.

On this Christmas morning in the child of Bethlehem hope is reborn! Encouraged by others who have lit lamps of hope, let's find our own ways, in our own settings, to be bearers of hope for the worlds we inhabit. That way we will know that our Saviour has come to us, to abide with us, to be our Lord Emmanuel.

1718 Words

Reverend Julian Francis

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