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At Christmas I often hear folks suggesting, in churches and in the media that there is a divide, or a competition, between secular and sacred, that is witnessed in the shopping and partying, the good food and gifts. But is there really a divide? Or are we stoking a culture war that doesn't exist? The joy of giving, spending time with chosen family, volunteering to help those who are isolated, singing carols together - to me, Christmas is the one time at which vast numbers of folks join in sharing the Good News of love and the gap between secular and sacred - if such a gap exists - is at its most narrow. This year, I've been reflecting on the way in which Christmas songs reflect the Gospel message, the Good News that is ushered in in a simple home.

As Perry Como and The Fontane Sisters know:

***“It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas
Soon the bells will start
And the thing that'll make 'em ring is the carol that you sing
Right within your heart
It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas
Toys in every store
But the prettiest sight to see is the holly that will be
On your own front door”***

Our own front door can, indeed, be a place of hope for the hopeless, and rest for the weary. Throughout the worst parts of the Covid19 crisis, many stood outside our own front doors sharing hope and joy with others, despite our necessary isolation. Despite the terror of war and oppression, many have opened those same doors to individuals and families fleeing Ukraine.

Jesus's migrant parents, travelling from one region to another to fulfil the census ordered by an overly powerful ruler knocked on a door, far from home, only to be told that there was no room at the inn. This is often the message that migrants to our own shores receive, too. And yet, the innkeeper, thinking creatively, offers room at the manger. It's not ideal, but it is honest: a real, individual human being

sharing the little that he has so that new hope might be brought to birth in a troubled world.

As we celebrate that new hope, I wonder if we can help our leaders to think creatively, making room for hope to shine in the lives of all weary travellers, from all over the world.

Even more optimistic yet were Yoko Ono and John Lennon, writing:

***“So this is Christmas (War is over)
And what have we done? (If you want it)
Another year over (War is over)
And a new one just begun (Now)
And so Happy Christmas (War is over)
We hope you have fun (If you want it)
The near and the dear ones (War is over)
The old and the young (Now)
War is over, if you want it,
War is over now.”***

Do we want it? Of course we do. Ono and Lennon cleverly mix their idealistic claim that war is over now, with the narrative of a Christmas celebrated with family and friends. The onus, they suggest, is on us. Peace is possible, but it is neither easy nor simple. It is not without sacrifice. Peace wasn't easy on that first Christmas day, either. Imagine being told that the hope of peace for the whole world rested on the tiny shoulders of the new born son for whom you laboured long in the straw and the mess... Christmas is about labouring for peace, rather than resting in it. And so, as we celebrate that labouring towards peace, I wonder if we can be people live out that call to peace, embodied in the Christ child, as we lighten the yoke of oppression for others.

Joni Mitchell does not share Lennon's optimism about this special day, lamenting: ***“It's coming on Christmas they're cutting down trees, they're putting up reindeer and singing songs of joy and peace. Oh, I wish I had a river I could skate away on”***

In our reading from Isaiah, the prophet foretells a time at which we

will have 'joy as if at the harvest'. Christmas day is all about that joy of abundance – abundant presents, abundant food, abundant good company. But we live in a world of scarcity, where the greed of capitalism leads to immense piles of wasted food, where the idolatrous love of borders leads to a lack of folks to work together to harvest food, and where both the cost of living crisis and the fear of differences tear families apart and leave little to celebrate. It's coming on Christmas, and it is time to stop cutting down trees. As you open your gifts today, enjoy them, savour them, and spare a thought for those who have less, or even nothing at all. Consider how you might live simply this year, skating towards a better future for all. But, for now, let's turn towards the joy of Christmas.

Perhaps one of the most well-known, and, in my opinion, joyously annoying Christmas songs is brought to us by Mariah Carey. She tells us that:

***“I don't want a lot for Christmas there is just one thing I need.
I don't care about the presents underneath the Christmas tree
I just want you for my own. More than you could ever know.
Make my wish come true. All I want for Christmas is you.”***

The Gospels suggest that shepherds - ordinary, smelly night workers with little power - were the first invited to meet Christ. And they celebrate by sharing that Good News with everyone that they know. Today is a day to meet Christ – to meet the love of God. Whether we spend today alone or with others, God is with us. Desperate to meet those shepherds, God sends a whole host of angels out to invite them to Christ's side. God is so desperate to meet us, and to meet every person that we encounter, that they send us out to share our lives with each-other and with strangers near and far.

On witnessing God meeting with the shepherds, with these unlikely and yet cherished guests, Mary treasured their words, and pondered them in her heart. I wonder what would change if we treasured the words of everyone we met, if we really listened, if we really saw Christ in every stranger's eyes. I wonder what you are pondering in your heart today.

The thing about that song, 'all I want for Christmas is you' is that, if that 'you' is Christ, then it is all of us. We see Christ in each other. We love Christ by loving each other.

This Christmas, let's celebrate Christ, by celebrating each-other. This Christmas, and all through the coming year, I pray that we might encounter and share Christ's love in ever new ways, with everyone we meet.

May it be so.

Amen.