

# DIOCESE IN EUROPE

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THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND

The Bishop in Europe:  
**The Right Reverend Dr. Robert Innes**



## CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2017

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The message of Christmas is so much bigger and better than the trappings of Christmastime! As I write these words, the temperature is about 23 degrees. The red hot poker and bird of paradise are in flower and large bunches of bananas are hanging from the trees. I am visiting the island of Madeira - a thousand miles away from the land of Charles Dickens 'A Christmas Carol' and the German Christmas markets which have so conditioned the contemporary northern European Christmastime. So the absence of some familiar trappings (like cold weather!) turns me back to the gospel and to the great mystery of the incarnation recounted by St. John.

'In the beginning', says St. John, 'was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God.' The good news, with which John's gospel starts, is that we human beings are not first in the world nor alone in the world. The Word is first and has come to us. He is before us and with us. So, John's prologue lifts us above history, into a mystery: the glorious world of God's eternity, glory and saving purposes. John talks about the nature of God. He explains who Jesus is. And he announces who we can become through believing in him.

In John's Prologue, the most important affirmation about God is the last one: that God is Father. God is in a unique way the Father of Jesus Christ, and he seeks a warm, intimate relationship with all who will receive, believe and abide in him.

Jesus is sent from God bringing light and life. He is like one torch lit from another. But the light is in continual tension with darkness. The darkness doesn't understand or comprehend the light. But neither can it overcome the light and put it out. There is a blindness in the world which means that people don't know the light when it comes. So when Jesus comes to his own people they receive him not.

Yet to those who do believe, Jesus gives the power to become children of God, children of the same heavenly father. It has been called a 'leap of faith'. But that makes belief in Jesus sound weird or irrational. We might better talk about a 'leap of imagination'. It is about daring to imagine the colours in which our lives could be painted. It is about extending our minds to comprehend a person who embodies goodness and truth and grace.

To put it another way, believing in Jesus is a matter of growing in relationship with the truth. We have dismally learnt to think of ourselves as 'post-truth' – a society where truth is simply lost in emotion and clamour and nothing can be believed. Instead, the Christmas gospel invites us to a relationship with the God who is truth where we can find enduring stability and peace.

The final verse of John's prologue is the climax towards which the passage is building. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." This is the astonishing affirmation that the God who is eternal spirit becomes man in a particular time and a particular place in human history. God becomes flesh – this stuff which is mortal, so fragile, so easily damaged.

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Amongst all the Christmas gifts, this is the supreme gift – God’s greatest ever gift to the world. It is the gift of a person full of grace – of loveliness, goodness, graciousness – in contrast to the ungraciousness and ugliness into which he is born. And it is a gift, a person, full of truth – reality, integrity, trustworthiness. In fragile flesh he comes and dwells, or literally ‘pitches his tent’, amongst us. And what a resonant image that is in our current circumstances. God who is outside space and time comes into human reality to transform it from within.

The incarnation is an event which human beings have from time to time realized is of world changing significance. Which is why people were right to reset our Western calendar at zero to mark this birthday. And in our own day and in our Anglican diocese in Europe I meet individual Christians and churches who are inspired by their own encounter with Jesus to do things which make a difference. Building bridges between people of different countries, creating community, reaching out to strangers, helping – those fleeing as refugees to find a new home.

We each of us have a tendency, sometimes called ‘sin’ to turn in on ourselves. Perversely, we often prefer darkness to light and perhaps in this past year the sense of darkness has seemed stronger. But as we prepare for Christmas we recollect again that the light comes into the world in the person of Jesus, that the darkness has not overcome it, and that the inspiration Jesus has provided to his followers continues to ensure that the light shines brightly.

Wherever you live in our vast European diocese, I wish each of you and your families a very happy Christmas. And I hope that during 2018, whatever the year ahead brings, God will irradiate your lives with his presence and peace.

*+ Robert Gibraltar in Europe*

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