

CHRISTMAS EVE: 2022

Listening the other day to my favourite contemporary artist, David Hockney, immaculately dressed and now wearing his favourite (less sartorial) 'crocs' on his feet ... he was ruminating about old age. He thought he might, perhaps, have five years left (he is 85 years young).

He famously smokes, of course, and passionately, defiantly, continues to paint such huge vibrant canvases of the countryside – to literally, die for! He has to paint, he wants to paint, and he does so with such a love for creation and such a knowledge and wisdom about the beautiful gift of creativity. I am always charmed when he speaks with such a zest for life and living. So, I was disarmed when he said so recently, and with that glint in his eyes, “the present is eternal”.

Compare and contrast, a message I received in one of our Christmas cards, the depressing (yet common) theme of which, many of you may also have read - or received - something similar?

“We are now old and decrepit; our children are middle aged women and our grandchildren are becoming young adults – where did life go?”

That whimsical question contrasts with the artist's more positive take on the time we have left, the time we have left to carry on working, giving, enabling and creating – or the time we have left reminiscing, regretting, or even feeling sorry for ourselves.

Both positions, statements and, 'mission statements' if you like, are absolutely authentic and real and heartfelt. But neither of them tell the whole truth, like tonight's famous Gospel's opening imperative:

"In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God".

When, already, we are 'carolled out' with so many church, school and village/town 'sing-alongs' – here there are no scriptural nativity clothes or details; no shepherds or even angels; not even that famous Franciscan crib scene with the animals amidst the warming barn straw, looking on and warming us. No!

Tonight's Evangelist wants us to link the mystery and wonder of this night with the beginning of Creation itself: with that 'Big-Bang' moment when, literally, light was created out of darkness and both beauty and order created out of chaos – a new and everlasting Eden where God's life-giving oceans and waters flow, and apple and fig trees continually blossom.

Tonight is an absolute and theological truth for all time: that God came down to Earth and became one of us and, the One **for** us, and our salvation. Tonight, heaven touches this beautiful earth which God made and it was good: yesterday, today and, tomorrow. Alpha and Omega are inextricably one.

So yes, I understand that inspiring 'Hockney' view of life that we should treasure the present and live as fully within it as we possibly can. But that day by day present, however happy or fulfilling, will soon become the past, a joyous memory

even - when the Christian story is saying something even more profound here: that God's creation is eternal, tonight's gift of the Incarnation is eternal, and yes, all our futures rest with Him who gave us life out of nothing, out of the dust, to offer us something wonderfully different and glorious, in this world and the next.

Our celebration again of Christ's birth is to know the purposes of God's creation and ongoing creativity, cherishing and protecting our common life certainly – but also falling to our knees before this 'Word made flesh' who lived among us. Having seen His glory we are to look for those same signs of grace and truth in our lives and living today.

We have to take more responsibility for our common care to protect the planet, to take more responsibility to be peacemakers, to feed the hungry and let the oppressed go free. We have to take more responsibility to become ports and havens of safety to the fleeing migrants and refugees of our troubled world.

There is no hiding, then, from the real possibilities of grace and truthfulness in our present and future living and letting them flourish and grow like the blossom on the greenest Tree of Life. The Church catholic is here 24/7 to pray for that future growth and flourishing in the God of all creation. This God who became Man completely changed and transformed how we look at, communicate with, and cherish, our love for the Creator and Sustainer of all life - as well as how we paint and direct a fairer and more glorious future for the World he

came to save. So, dear sisters and brothers: 'A happy and blessed Christmas' to you all. "For everything that has been, thanks; to everything that will be, yes."

Amen.