

2018 CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FROM THE BISHOP OF BLACKBURN

I was shocked by the results of a recent survey published in December by the very respected Joseph Rowntree Foundation on poverty in the United Kingdom.

Child poverty has been rising since 2011/12; 4.1 million children live in poverty, a rise of 500,000 in the last five years and four million workers are living in poverty.

These are scary statistics which, even if not fully accurate, offer a worrying commentary on the kind of society we have become and the struggle many face in making ends meet.

The existence of foodbanks and the increase in their use in recent months, as told to me in a recent visit to the remarkable Blackburn foodbank, is a sad reflection on this struggle; though of course we pay tribute to the many who are engaged in providing this crucial lifeline.

And the problem is that the way we do Christmas in this country now doesn't help.

The focus on having things and giving things, in response to the subtle advertising campaigns about what makes for a perfect Christmas, only increases that sense of division between those who have much and those who have little. It also creates the pressure to buy on credit, go into debt, and live for now, without thinking of the consequences.

I was moved to read recently of the story of a new young Christian believer in the Middle East, who celebrated Christmas for the first time last year saying: "From the outside it was nothing special. Just me and my mother and my little brother sitting at the table, as we do each night. But this night, somehow automatically, I put down a fourth plate, for Jesus."

They had no gifts to unwrap, but the gifts Jesus gave them were more precious than anything a human could give.

In that country, at every Christmas time, house churches are raided and yet this 21 year old new believer is ready to suffer for Jesus Christ, saying: 'the Lord is my ultimate power and I hope this Christmas will be as special as the first'.

Just over a year ago a young family not far from here went to a poor country for a holiday and the three children saw other children there with nothing.

When last Christmas they were overwhelmed by presents from doting grandparents, they decided as children that each of them would give one of their presents away.

A generous spirit and concern for others reflects the generosity of God, who so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

As we celebrate Jesus' birth this Christmas, for whom there was no room in the inn or in many people's lives at that time, let us make sure there is room in our life for Him as well as room for the needs of others.

The Bible tells us: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." 2 Corinthians 8.9

A happy Christmas does not depend so much on WHAT you have, but WHO you have.

May I wish you that kind of happy Christmas and God's blessing for the New Year.

Rt Rev. Julian Henderson
Bishop of Blackburn