

FOCUS ON FAITH

IMAGINE

I'm writing this column in the week the world remembers the 25th anniversary of the death of John Lennon. Like many other people, his life was ended by an act of unwarranted, needless violence but, also like many others, he left us a legacy that we can remember him by.

In what many people consider to be his greatest song, John Lennon asked us to imagine. To imagine a world living in peace, without violence or greed, where a brotherhood of man shared what they had with each other.

In the song he acknowledges that some may think him to be a dreamer and if we look at our world, you could be forgiven for thinking that he must have been. All around us we see the evidence of man's (and woman's) inhumanity towards each other. It comes in many guises – some blatant and some which are less obvious. Terrorism or the fight against it; civil war and ethnic cleansing; street crime and robbery hit the headlines virtually every day of the week. On the other hand, lives ruined through redundancy in the cause of business efficiency or globalisation, domestic violence and people hurt in accidents through carelessness or misadventure, tend to have a lower profile but they still impact those affected. And in the run up to Christmas it also seems so much more poignant when a terminal illness is diagnosed or a car smash ends in a fatality.

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Lennon's song reminds me of someone else that people tend to think of as being a dreamer – Jesus. Just looking at the lyrics of *'Imagine'*, I imagine Jesus would have agreed with many of the sentiments expressed. I'm sure he would have disagreed with the bit that talks about there being no heaven or hell but I get the feeling Jesus would have agreed about the line which suggests there should be no religion.

Why? Because the Christian faith is about relationship rather than the rules and regulations of religion. For me the whole essence of Christianity is summed up in one of the names Jesus was given. Emmanuel means *"God with us."* And that to me is the difference between faith and religion. Religion tends to emphasise our need to get to God – to work out our own salvation and make God proud of us. Faith on the other hand, reflects the fact that God has done it all and that we can enjoy a relationship with Him through Jesus.

As we approach Christmas during this Advent period – a time of preparation and reflection – I'm struck by the similarities of what was happening in Jesus' time with what is happening now in our era. A foreign power (the Romans) occupied His country. There was an underground resistance movement trying to overthrow the puppet King who ruled with fear and violence.

There was poverty and unemployment, discontent and unhappiness in relationships and many who were disadvantaged.

Against this backdrop in a nondescript town in a backwater far from the centres of power and influence an unmarried girl has an amazing encounter with an Angel who tells her she's been chosen to become the mother of the Son of God. It may be difficult to imagine but for millions of us the virgin birth that we celebrate at Christmas is recognition of the love God has for us. He stepped into our world as flesh and blood. He identified with us, became like us and ultimately demonstrated God's love for us by dying on a cross. God didn't stay aloof and indifferent to human tragedy and suffering – Jesus experienced it too!

Can you imagine what that was like? And can you imagine what our world could be like if we took on board what Jesus said? To love one another as much as we love ourselves. To forgive other people when they wrong us and not to harm them in our words and actions. To give and not expect in return. To bless and not to curse. To honour, respect and recognise those in authority. To uphold family values and appreciate those with whom we have relationships.

You may think I'm a dreamer – but believe me I'm not the only one! Christmas is not just a story and it's not just for children. It can become a reality for each of us and we can make a difference to our world as we receive and believe in Jesus – God with us! Have a great **CHRISTmas**.

Details of Christmas Church Services and other contact information can be obtained by logging on to www.lifting-jesus-higher.org.uk.



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