**Christmas Day Sermon by the Bishop of Salisbury in Salisbury Cathedral 2022**

Six months ago, I stood in this pulpit for the first time as Bishop of Salisbury. It has been a relentless six months, and not just for me as the new kid on the block. Since that sunny June day, we have changed monarchs for the first time in over 70 years, a lifetime. Mr Johnson was Prime Minister, and there have been two since. The cost-of-living crisis was a prophecy on the horizon not yet a hard reality. The new normal of the post pandemic period has been anything but a release from restrictions with many people having to make choices this Christmas between heating and eating. These times hit the poorest the hardest. Some new figures show that some 2.6 million people have sought help from their local church because of the cost of living, and we have been there to help, unconditionally. The foodbank donor becomes the foodbank user. And yet, in just the last 24 hours, the Church of England Christmas advert has been viewed over five million times. We are here, and we are serving our nation. So Happy Christmas everyone.

Six months ago, I became known for giving out a thousand envelopes as we lived out the Parable of the Talents. Inside was a ten-pound note for everyone, £10 thousand pounds generously donated. It wasn’t about money, it was about action, and about compassion, and about confidence in ourselves and the Gospel.

In Atworth they matched the £10 and raised £230 and that money is supporting two families this Christmas. There’s been jam making, Teddy Bear Parachuting, a Magic Money Tree for Harvest raising £180, three families were sent on a summer camp and many more gathered for three days of a children’s film club. At Puddletown First School they decided to sow sunflower seeds and sell the pots. Their Year 1 teacher went to the garden centre to get the seeds and pots, and a lady in the queue for the till behind her enquired what all this was for. The cashier overheard and called over her manager. He donated the seeds and pots, and everyone felt the world was a better place. The children sowed their seeds and raised £84 which they donated to the local hospice where a young school mum had died recently.

At Wiltshire County Council, at a coordinating meeting to tackle the cost-of-living crisis, the Leader of the Council pulled out his golden envelope and placed it on the table amongst all the civic leaders. This is how we start to help he said. Street Pastors in Salisbury have received £225 from a hot dog sale, and a new breakfast club was set up in Ensbury Park. A golf club turned their £10 into £130 for Cancer UK, and foodbanks across the diocese have benefited. Many people have generously increased the tenner tenfold and made charitable donations, especially to our link with the Sudan. A car boot sale turned £10 into £527. 23 pence to support Salisbury Ukrainians. In West Moors, they contributed towards their Sharing Shed where people can come and help themselves to food and domestic necessities. People come under the cover of darkness to hide their embarrassment. And at the Lantern Church in Canford Magna, they turned their £10 back into 1000 pennies and challenged the congregation to grow their pennies afresh. They grew it back to £10,000 which is supporting a number of community action projects. The list goes on and is too long, but Salisbury Diocese has certainly got talent!

Well, its Christmas isn’t it, so I have my little helpers again. Don’t build up your hopes too much, but there is another envelope for you this Christmas Day. Junior Choristers off you go, but everyone, don’t open your envelopes yet. John will play something festive for us.

Now, before you start imagining what you are going to do with your money, this is something different, but infinitely more valuable. Please open your envelopes………

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It doesn’t matter how many times you shake it, there’s no money this time, just Christmas wishes from me and my appropriately named wife, Carol. Here is our Christmas card. Inside you will find a Grace which I invite you to use with your Christmas dinner today, if you are lucky enough to have one a Christmas dinner that is. Go on, I dare you, say Grace on Christmas Day when you get home.

The card was designed by Orla, a Year 1 pupil at Bishop Aldhelm’s Primary Academy in Poole. Orla is six. Take a moment to look intently at Orla’s depiction of the incarnation. Thinking of our world, of the human condition, of all our failings, our selfish choices and power struggles, this is the response of God. Into our daily reality, and into the realities where life is cheap, this is what God does at Christmas. When times are difficult, we seek for answers, we search for certainty, and we oppose each other, and the response of God, is to come as a child, living under an occupying army, born without a home, and fleeing as a refugee. Sound familiar?

God’s answer to our questions, is himself. This is not the all-powerful dictator or politician who tries to rule our lives, this is the Son of God who comes to govern our hearts with the law of love. In fact, God is so humble, so bold, so simple, that his response to human evil is to place the most precious gift ever into our hands. I invite you, please take a look at your hands, God is placed there – vulnerable, able to be squeezed out, or able to be shared, to be held, to be loved as we are first loved. God places all of his talent into our hands, so the question is, what do we do with it. Or in traditional words, the poverty of our nature is transformed by the riches of his grace.

In a moment, as Christmas reaches its peak, you will be invited to come towards him, and with your feeble hands held out, that answer to everything will be placed in your palm. God with us, God with you. He loves you so much, that he comes just to you, in person, here and now. And the right response is to take him to ourselves, be one with him and his will for the world, and to share ourselves with others as we share his unconditional love.

This is not a ten-pound note, it is the meaning of our existence. Take a look at the card once more. Look who is smiling at you.

God is love, and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them.

Happy Christmas.

*The Rt Revd Stephen Lake*