Bishop Michael – Christmas Sermon 2023

Many of us here will know well the long running radio show called ‘Desert Island Discs’. If you’re visiting the United Kingdom or if ‘Desert Island Discs’ has somehow passed you by, let me explain how it works. Each week, a famous or worthy person chooses the eight records that tell the story of their life and that they’d take with them if they were to be marooned alone on a desert island. They also get the Bible, the complete works of Shakespeare, the book of their choice and a luxury they’d like to take with them. So for example in recent episodes, Shirley Ballas, head judge on ‘Strictly’, chose among her eight songs ‘Ring of Fire’ by Jonny Cash and ‘Smells like teen spirit’ by Nirvana. While Pia Sinha, Director of the Prison Reform Trust chose among her eight ‘The Power of Love’ by Frankie Goes to Hollywood and ‘Hometown Glory’ by Adele.

Lovely as having our eight favourite records to play on our desert island might be, the task of choosing them seems to me to be one that’s fraught with peril. For you’d need to be sure that every track was one that you could listen to again, and again, and again, and again. Each record would need to have enough depth and intensity constantly to offer you something new, something more to discover. Would you get that after the 50th rendition of ‘Nellie the Elephant’? I reckon it might pale soon before that.

I’ve been thinking about ‘Desert Island Discs’ because I’ve wondered, if I could take just one section of the Bible with me to a desert island, which part of scripture would I choose? What words would have the depth and intensity to keep on offering me within them something new, something to discover. As I’ve thought about it, I’ve wondered whether the text I’d choose would be the Gospel Reading we just listened to, the first fifteen verses of the Gospel according to John.

Why choose these words? We could spend the whole of this and many other nights discussing them. But I reckon that all of us would like at some point to get home. So let me give you just three thoughts about John’s text to ponder on this evening.

First, the horizon of these words is infinite. When you step out of the doors of this church tonight, look up, beyond the street lights and see the night sky stretching ever onwards above you. John tells us how all this came to be. ’All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being’ says John. These words are about everything.

Second, while their horizon might be infinite, John’s words have a location that’s particular. They take shape in a person, a time, an identity, a place. ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us’ says John. The author of everything that is doesn’t exist just as a thought, an idea, a meme, an algorithm. He’s a person just like us. He’s got a name – Jesus – and as John’s Gospel goes on to tell has a background, a family, relationships, a story that’s as real and particular as each of ours.

Third, this God who is with us offers us a future with hope. ‘To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.’ Through this baby born in a stable, all of us are invited to be God’s children – filled with his life, love, presence, possibility.

I’ve only scratched the surface of John’s words. During this Christmas time why not take some time out to read them and think about them more? Savour their depth and intensity that can only keep on offering you something new, something to discover.

But here’s the thing about Desert Island Discs. We might well worry that we would tire of our eight records. But surely, if we were marooned on a desert island, a bigger worry would be that before too long we’d tire of ourselves. Get fed up of the record of our lives and thoughts that goes round and round and round.

The good news of Christmas is that Jesus, the Word, whose coming among us we celebrate this night, will never tire of us. His infinite and all encompassing gaze fixes on the unique creation that’s each one of us to fill us with his hope. The Word, Jesus, God with us, constantly seeks us out to ask the three questions that are at the heart of every human life:

*Firstly ‘Who are you?’* What’s at the heart of your life and your identity? What’s most important about you?

*Second ‘How are you?’* How are you doing? What are your joys? What are your sorrows? What are your hopes? What are your disappointments? What are your dreams?

*Thirdly ‘How are you with God?’* Who is God for you? How do you experience God in your soul? What does God ask of you at this point in your life? How do you respond to God’s offer of the gift of his life into yours that he makes to you in Jesus this Christmas and always?

It’s when we bring these questions into a conversation with what our Gospel message from John that the good stuff really happens. For Jesus isn’t waiting for us on a desert island. Or up there. Or far away. He is right here, with us and for us – concerned with all that we are, intimately interested in all that we might be. In him there’s always more to be discovered – about God, about everything that is, about us.

Each one of us is the record that Jesus can play again and again and again. If Jesus were choosing his eight discs – each of us would be one of them. Amen.