Sermon by the Archbishop of Canterbury Christmas Day 1996

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Journey of the Magi.

Ministries

Professor John Barrow of the Astronomy Centre at Sussex University

Instruments of Communion

Happiness but often failing to find spiritual fulfilment. They have lost their place in a shared understanding of what life is for, pursuing short and friends around. But they are spiritual refugees, sometimes aware in their heart of hearts that they are

Refugees. There’s an element of that in the Christmas story. We sometimes forget that the first Christmas parents find him'.

The birth of Jesus Christ is history’s most celebrated event and a very down to earth story. I caught a fresh glimpse of its meaning when I saw a heart holding out his hand beseeching someone to take it and look after him. I was more than relieved when a

separated from his parents and hopelessly lost. He was turning this way and that way, bewildered and the move and had no

That search for a spiritual home still goes on amongst people of every social, intellectual, religious and have stopped thinking seriously about life itself.

Do you know to next to nothing of the Wise Men. One reason why Matthew tells their story, albeit briefly, is to emphasise that the message of Jesus is universal: it is for everyone.

Many of the things we locate as being part of the spiritual side of human nature are not extraneous to the universe and secondary to it, but at its heart. The moment we stop asking ‘theological’ questions about the mystery of life is the time when we

We have seen it expressed this year in the response to the killings at Dunblane and to the murder of Philip Lawrence. It has been there too in the debates on morality and the call for our Millennium Celebrations to be something much more than a trade fair or a street party.

Yet it is not just a physical home that people are longing for. In our society, that feels at times so adrift from its moral, historical and institutional roots, I detect an increasing desire in people to find a spiritual home. We have seen it expressed this year in the response to the killings at Dunblane and to the murder of Philip Lawrence. It has been there too in the debates on morality and the call for our Millennium Celebrations to be something much more than a trade fair or a street party.

And there is another kind of journey that Christmas beckons us to continue. It is a spiritual journey towards God. As human beings we can try to suppress, but we can never finally avoid, the questions that surround us. For instance, there is the question of mystery. Why is there something rather than nothing? Indeed, why does the universe bother to exist? Those are, of course, in essence, deeply theological questions. In a recent book The Artful Universe Professor John Barrow of the Astronomy Centre at Sussex University makes the interesting point that the things we locate as being part of the spiritual side of human nature - music, art, love, religion and beauty and so on - are not extraneous to the universe and secondary to it, but at its heart.

The moment we stop asking ‘theological’ questions about the mystery of life is the time when we have stopped thinking seriously about life itself.

Or again there is the question of meaning. Somehow our nature rebels against the idea that this life is all there is. It is not simply the fear of death that finds eternal life attractive. Rather, it is the belief that all that we long, hope and strive for must continue in some shape and form. ‘Thou hast set eternity in man’s heart’ exclaims the Old Testament. Perhaps it was the question of meaning that prompted the Wise Men’s quest. Was there a guiding star, a messiah, who might perhaps be the locus of meaning? Certainly it was something worth making sacrifices for as they sought to resolve that question.
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One of the things I like most about Christmas is that it is an opportunity for us to take stock and consider the things he valued most in life were the things he had spent least time on. He was led to re

A deep friendship grew between herself and Simon Barrington-Ward, the Bishop of Coventry. Starting from their common interest in Hegel, and her own wide reading in theology, she shared with him, as with other spiritual allies, her own ethical and theological explorations. Then, two years before her death, she was told she had cancer. It spread swiftly throughout her body, but her indomitable mind refused to accept the finiteness of life.

And, gloriously, we know that her experience is far from unique. The journey of faith is intensely personal and we are all at different stages. Some may be very much at a questioning stage. Others may be feeling that they are much closer to resolving their difficulties than once they were. Yet others may be able to look back with thankfulness that they have found their spiritual home. The message of Christmas for us all is that God's hand is always outstretched and that he is willing to guide us; but as with Gillian, to do that he requires our 'yes'.

Ends

Archbishop of Canterbury's Thought for the Day - Christmas, 1996

Good Morning.

The birth of Jesus Christ is history's most celebrated event and a very down to earth story. I caught a fresh glimpse of its meaning when I saw a heart-rending sight on TV a few weeks ago.

It was during the mass exodus of Rwandan refugees from their camp in Zaire. About half a million were on the move and no where to go. I spotted a little boy, no more than a toddler, perhaps 2 or 3 years of age, separated from his parents and hopelessly lost. He was turning this way and that way, bewildered and holding out his hand beseeching someone to take it and look after him. I was more than relieved when a Red Cross official came along and guided him into a lorry. I remember thinking: 'Poor little chap. I hope his parents find him'.

Refugees. There's an element of that in the Christmas story. We sometimes forget that the first Christmas tells the story of a couple far from home who were required by the authorities to register in their native city. Far from their own home Mary gave birth to her first child. Jesus was not born in a refugee camp but it was the next thing to it - no mother or mother in law to help with the delivery; no friends to surround them with congratulations and offers of help and support. One of the most touching verses in the New Testament is the one in John's Gospel where John writes: 'He came unto his own and his own received him not'.

Putting those two stories together makes me wonder about a condition I call spiritual refugeism. There are so many people in our world who are as lost as that Rwandan boy. They may have comfortable homes and friends around. But they are spiritual refugees, sometimes aware in their heart of hearts that they are living in another kind of transit camp. So many people in our society have lost their religious and moral roots. They have lost their place in a shared understanding of what life is for, pursuing short-term happiness but often failing to find spiritual fulfillment.

But sometimes people like that find the Christ-Child transforming their lives. Let me give you an example. I have a friend who is a very successful business man. At the very height of his success his wife died after a lingering illness. Through her courage and faith he was taught many things - the most valuable being that the things he valued most in life were the things he had spent least time on. He was led to re-examine his life. And like that little African boy I spoke of, he held out his hand to someone and found there was someone waiting for him.

One of the things I like most about Christmas is that it is an opportunity for us to take stock and consider the journey we are on. There are many who stay in today's spiritual refugee camp. They have been there so long that they have forgotten about the country that Christian people call home - the one where God is King and where faith, hope and love are the currency of the Kingdom. But, there are others who, when they hear the Christmas story, feel something stir deep inside them and know that they are on that journey home.