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Christmas op-ed – Bishop Mark Calder

Christmas comes to us after a year marked by news that has been deeply unsettling. Violence close to home, ongoing conflict overseas, and stories that disturb and weary us. Into a world like this, Matthew's Gospel reminds us that the first Christmas also arrived with shocking news.

Mary, pledged to be married, was found to be pregnant. In first-century Jewish life, this was scandalous and devastating. For Joseph, it meant confusion, fear and a decision that could have ended everything quietly and safely. Yet God intervened. An angel told Joseph that this child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Shocking news - but also the most wonderful news imaginable.

For this child was to be given two names, each filled with hope.

First, **Jesus**—a name that means *God saves*. Christmas tells us that God does not stand at a distance from human failure and sin. He steps into our world to deal with it. Jesus came to save his people from their sins—to restore what has been broken between us and God, through forgiveness won at the cross.

Second, **Immanuel**—*God with us*. Not God far away, but God alongside us. Sharing our world, our pain, our joys and our fears. God who knows what it is to suffer, to be rejected, and yet to love without limit. And by his Spirit, he is still with us today.

So, Christmas proclaims both forgiveness and presence: we can be put right with God, and we are not alone. My prayer this Christmas is that you will know **both** truths deeply—that you can be **forgiven** in **Christ**, and you can know that **God is with you**, whatever your present circumstances.

Have a joyful Christmas!

Mark

Bishop Mark Calder