

Last week, Canadian Presbyterian pastor Hyeon Soo Lim was sentenced to life in hard labour in North Korea, where he has travelled many times before bringing food and other aid to the poor living in that country. Over several visits over the past 18 years, he helped to set up an orphanage and a nursing home for seniors, and continued to work to keep them supplied with everything they needed. He also did missionary work, which means that when people asked him why he was feeding the hungry and bringing clothes to those who did not have any, he told them about Jesus. And that is what got him into trouble. He was convicted earlier this year of crimes against the state of North Korea, using religion to upset the government.

On the surface of it, it sounds ridiculous. Telling people about Jesus as a threat to a government? But perhaps Kim Jong-un and his regime are right to be worried. Christianity changes things.

- slavery in the U.S.
- caste system
- challenge this birth represented... came to poor family, not Herod et al (contrast set up by the way Luke begins the story)... announced to shepherds...first last, last first/magnificat

In the US election, people looking for someone to make their lives better. In Canada, recent election had a similar theme, people looking for hope in times of economic uncertainty.

Jesus' birth counters the suggestion that the world's hopes might lie in the hands of the rulers of this age. The world's hopes lie in him.

Hope lies in the manger, challenging the powers and principalities of this world that want us to believe that might makes right, that want us to believe that the people who are in power now will always be in power. The powers that want us to acquiesce in the enslavement of others. In the objectification of others. In the exploitation of others. For their enrichment and, let's face it, for our own comfort as well.

The story of Christmas dares to tell us another truth, a deeper truth. Immanuel. God is with us. And God is with us not, or at least, not only in the palaces and the sanctuaries, in the halls of government or the homes of the wealthy. God is with us in the poorest of the poor, in the ones we would rather ignore, in the ones we fail to see.

For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, God has broken. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

Maybe not the images we usually associate with Christmas, we prefer to think about chestnuts roasting on the fire, not garments rolled in blood

- Isaiah's promise of the one who was to come bringing an end to the trappings of war, bringing an end to violence and the need for violence, being prince of peace

Truly he taught us to love one another. His law is love and his gospel is peace. Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother and in his name all oppression shall cease.

Christmas means many things to many people. It is celebrated by people who have never even heard of Jesus, people who believe more in Santa than they do in God. For some, it is about family. For some, it is about the children. For some, it is about the parties, time with friends. For some, it's about celebrating the start of the winter season (feel sorry for them this year!).

But for those of us who mark Christmas as the birth of Jesus Christ, it is about God choosing to come among us as a poor, vulnerable child, a member of a people oppressed by the powerful Roman Empire. So that when we look upon someone who is poor, we see Christ. When we look at someone who is oppressed because of the colour of their skin, or their religion, or their ethnic background, or their sexual orientation, we see Christ. When we look at news stories of people who make less than a dollar a day in sweatshops, when we hear horrific news of young women trafficked into the sex trade, when we learn of people whose homes are destroyed by massive storms linked to climate change... in every one of them, we see Jesus.

And because we see Jesus in them, things change. Because Jesus is born in every human heart, because God comes to dwell with us in the lowly, humble places of our world, we are invited to worship him there and to serve him there. To worship and serve him at the food bank, and to worship and serve him by working for an end to the poverty that means we need food banks. To worship and serve him at the refugee resettlement centre, and to work for a just world where no one would ever be forced to leave their homes. To worship and serve him every time there is need in our world, because he is born there, too.

That is the real hope of Christmas, my friends; that the angels who proclaim peace on earth among those God favours are also inviting us to live that peace, to make that peace, to share that peace with those who most need it. A peace that is more than the absence of war, a peace that means justice for all people, a peace that means goodwill

for all people, a peace that means God's abundant blessings shared fairly among all of God's beloved children.

And that is how Christianity, how Christmas, how Christ born in us, changes the world.