



The Church of England
in Essex and East London
Diocese of Chelmsford

A Christmas message from the Bishop of Chelmsford

The Rt Revd Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani, the Bishop of Chelmsford has written a message for the Christmas season:

'Fear not said he for mighty dread had seized their trouble mind.'

These words from the famous carol, *While Shepherds Watched*, will be sung again this year in churches, schools, on village greens and in pubs all around the country. Since the 1700s, this faithful rendering from Luke's account set to a simple tune, has stood the test of time. Indeed, the description of the shepherds' fear when the angels appear speaks directly to our own time.

Fear is all around. Many live in fear of uncertainty; too many live in fear of domestic violence and abuse; in fear of failure, rejection, inadequacy. In our national life, fear of the outsider has led to deeply troubling rhetoric and policy proposals on immigration, with the fear of financial disaster making scapegoats of some of the most vulnerable in society. Nor is the church immune. Differences of perspectives in our internal debates, as well as our weighty responsibility in seeking to atone for past mistakes, can all too easily lead to a culture of fear.

But it is into all this that the angels arrive with their message, directly confronting the reality of our lives. It is right that we should take peoples' fears seriously, neither diminishing nor belittling them; moreover, working to overcome them. Yet in the midst of fear we encounter the gentle angelic rejoinder which paralysed the Shepherds. *FEAR NOT* ... because good news is brought to us, news of great joy for all people.

Sometimes we need encouragement to hear again the message of the angels. There is *joy* to be found in the stable scene in Bethlehem. There is *joy* in the angelic chorus that lifts us, as it did the shepherds, from crouching fear to the glory of the Highest Heaven. There is joy unbounded through the coming of the Christ child, in the love he proclaims and which Christians are called to share.

So this Christmas I pray that we allow the singing of the angels to overwhelm our fear, such that we can hear again the message of joy. Let us, like the Shepherds, leave the place of fear and *go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.*

+Guli Chelmsford