

Christmas Night
(Isaiah 9:1-7 / Luke 2:1-14)
24.12.2019

The Epistle to the Hebrews attributes to Christ words from a psalm when it places upon His lips these words as He entered into this world : *You have prepared a body for me.*

Christmas is essentially about our God having taken on our flesh – a human body – in the Christ-child, born of Mary. As we celebrate this feast we are invited us to embrace and rejoice in the gift of the incarnation. The *incarnation* is absolutely central to our Christian faith. It is vital that we grasp its significance for our lives. The fact that God became man – and, to begin with, a helpless infant in the infant born of Mary – points to the inherent goodness of our physical being; first and foremost, the goodness of our earthly bodies. I wonder how many of us actually appreciate and rejoice in the body in which we are called to live our life. I wonder how many of us actually feel at home in our flesh. I wonder how many of us feel comfortable under our own skin. I suspect that many of us – if not most of us – fail to fully appreciate the gift of our body. We can be negligent when it comes to caring for our bodies. We can be neglectful when it comes to honouring our bodies and treating them as lovingly as we should. Thomas Aquinas dares to say that our bodies are the most precious gift God has given us. And yet, there are many well-meaning Christians who put all the emphasis upon their *spiritual being* to the detriment of their physical being! Many Christians think that physical matter is of lesser importance than what they refer to as *spiritual things*. The way some Scriptural texts have been read and interpreted in certain Christian circles across the centuries has not always helped in this respect. As a result, many Christians are prone to undervalue what I call *the sacramentality of their bodiliness*. So often we ourselves will fall down in this regard. What an affront to God it is for us to underestimate the extraordinary value of our earthly existence! And yet we do this. We so easily forget that God reveals Himself to us, first and foremost, by way of our *en-fleshed experience*. One spiritual writer captures this well when he writes: *The fact that a holy God was willing to unite with a physical body in the person of Jesus (1 John 4:2) affirms God's appreciation of physical matter and earthly existence. He came not to eradicate this world, but to redeem it and make it new (Col. 1:20)* Many of us have yet to integrate that fundamental Christian message!

The particular circumstances surrounding Christ's birth show us that, in taking on our flesh, the God we worship was not afraid to be associated with the weakness and messiness that are part of our earthly existence; they show us that He was ready to espouse the vulnerability of this world.

In Christ-Jesus the God of the Bible appears as He truly is: not as some aloof, far-off deity, one beyond our reach, but rather as *God-with-us*. In the infant Jesus we are given to contemplate *God with us* in the fragility of a little child.

In Christ-Jesus our God appears in our midst as One willing to get involved. By the incarnation, God entered into the chaos and turmoil of this world. The circumstances of Christ's birth at a time of such upheaval and grave unrest – circumstances which led Jesus' parents' to take flight into Egypt in order to protect His infant life, are not without resonances with the lives of so many people in today's world. Our reading of the Infancy Narrative tonight and in the coming days – if it is an authentic reading – will lead us to think of the plight of hosts of migrants who at the present time are fleeing their homelands in a bid to find safe shelter for their children and in the hope of assuring for them a future free from violent aggression and the threat of death.

Is it not a great consolation for us to realise that the Incarnate Word came to walk this earth in a person just like us, a person of flesh and blood – someone weak and vulnerable? It is

Christ's solidarity with the human condition that leads us to think of our God as One who is compassionate with us in weakness, a tower of strength beside as we grapple with life's ongoing challenges.

At this point I feel led to quote Jean Vanier – a great servant of the weak and vulnerable who went to his eternal reward earlier this year. I think of what Vanier wrote in his book *Broken Body: The word became flesh and His name is Jesus. He came as a tiny child in the womb of a woman. He was clothed in the flesh of a child in need of its mother, crying out for protection and help. At birth Jesus had no security but the arms of Mary and the presence of Joseph. He became a child refugee as the family fled to Egypt, encountering dangers and uncertainties... The Word made flesh lived the humble, lowly life of a poor family.*

There is great comfort for us in the thought that Christ took on flesh like ours – and that He truly inhabited this flesh. There is great comfort for us in the thought that the God-man, Christ, found and revealed His identity in a body just like ours, choosing to live and die in it... just as we are called to live our lives in our bodies and, when the time comes, pass away in them as Jesus did. Our Christmas hymns do not hide from us the fact that Christ was *born to die*, reminding of the great significance of this fact: *so that we might live for evermore.*

We find hope in the thought that Jesus endured the pain and grief of all those who walk the face of this earth; that He shed tears, not just as a frightened helpless infant, but as a deeply troubled and grieving adult. We read in John's gospel: *Jesus wept.* There is so much in that shortest verse of all the Bible. We are shown here how Jesus experienced the depths of human feelings. He wept as He stood beside the grave of one He loved.

If as we have heard in the Epistle Hebrews *Christ came into this world saying: You have prepared a body for me*, we also read in that same Epistle: *He had to be made like us in every way, except sin, in order that He might become a merciful and compassionate High Priest in the service of God, One who is capable of understanding human plight.* How important for us to remember that our God is *God with us*. We can be assured that, just as the Lord is with us in the good and pleasant moments of our lives, so too He is *God is with us* on the painful days we are led to traverse. Our God is *God-with-us* in our sorrows and in our distress. He is *God-with-us* when we endure harrowing loss and feel only the void of loneliness.

In the Infancy Narratives we contemplate the Christ-child whom Mary carried in her womb being presented to the world in all those who came to pay Him homage: the simple shepherds who gathered around mother and child; the sages from the East; and those prophetic figures, Simeon and Anna, to whom Mary and Joseph handed Jesus over for consecration to the Lord. The gesture of Jesus' Presentation reminded Mary and Joseph that their child's life was not theirs alone. The life Jesus' parents had received from God as a gift for a time they were called to give back to the Father. All those persons whom the gospels invite us to contemplate worshipping the Infant Christ, represent the long waiting and expectant hope of God's People of every age and generation, and, even over and beyond the fold of God's Chosen ones, the hope and longing of the whole of humanity.

It strikes me reading the gospel tonight that Mary who nursed the Christ child at His birth, holding Him close to her breast in His infancy, was later led to hold the same adult child in her arms in death. In the same way as Mary had cradled Jesus at His birth, so she was led to cradle Him again at the hour of His death.

The image of the Mother and Child depicted in the famous Pieta is as well-known as that of the Mother and Child of the crib. It is good for us to hold both these images together. To do so helps us move beyond a sentimental gaze at the crib to actually think of the full meaning of Christ's coming into this world of sin and death.

Remembering the two images I have just evoked – that of the crib and that of the Pieta – and holding them together, my thoughts turn tonight to those who are experiencing deep sorrow this year as they celebrate Christmas. I think of those who celebrate this Eucharist with us, with broken and yet firmly believing hearts. Their suffering is still so raw. And yet, even as they are steeped in sorrow, they still dare to hope in the Lord's promises and God's gracious gift of life beyond the grave. I know that they draw comfort from the apostle's promise: *Those who have died will rise again*. Looking to Christ, inclining the ear of their heart towards Him, they hear the Risen Lord say them: *I live*. Hearing that declaration, they dare to trust that those whom they loved in this life who have died now live *their real life hidden with Christ in God*.

The Lord of Life calls upon all of us tonight to bow down before Him; He invites us to honour His life within ourselves and in every living person we meet along life's way. He engages us to have genuine self-respect and practice true self-love. May we be encouraged to care for ourselves as we should. May we honour the divine life which is there within each one of us, awaiting that we pay Him proper homage.

Let us not forget that as Christian people our vocation is to prolong God's love here on earth; it is to reveal the Living Lord to others. Just as Christ revealed His Father to all those whose lives He touched, so we have for mission to make the Lord known and to reflect His image to others. Having experienced the Lord's coming here in this sacramental celebration, we are called to go forth from this place tonight to bring Christ to others. It is to be hoped that many people be led to know that it is Christmas – that Christ is born – by the love to which we bear witness in and through our own incarnate lives of flesh and blood.

May our love for others, like God's love for them, be a love of mercy and compassion... a love which dares to draw alongside those who suffer to the point of shedding tears with them. Often the tears we shed with the sorrowful will be more eloquent than the finest discourse we could proffer. Indeed, our tears may be the only word that makes sense to those who mourn in their brokenness. Tears shared with those who are in the depth of sorrow and distress will often convey a message more meaningful than any words we could ever speak. So many of the words we speak can appear to those who suffer just senseless chatter; *holy speak* that rings hollow.

May life and peace, love and consolation, be the message we are given to hear and take to heart tonight. May it also be the message we proclaim to others once we have gone forth from this place at the end of this celebration.

Amen!