

Christmas Night

(Isaiah 9:1-7 / Titus 2:11-14 / Luke 2:1-14)

24.12.2020

In the opening lines of the Gospel passage read at the heart of this Christmas Night celebration much is made of the historical context in which Christ came into this world. We are told that it was *in the time of Caesar Augustus, while Quirinius was Governor of Syria, during the year of the Great Census*. That was not an easy time to live through. We know, for example, that there were severe taxes imposed upon the population by the dominant Roman occupiers.

I think most people who keep Christmas this year will also remember its very particular historical context for generations to come. They will recall that we celebrated Christmas 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic which is paralysing people's lives all over the world in so many ways. This year's festival is marked by severe travel disruption; the restrictions in place mean that families and friends can gather in a very limited way; only small numbers can meet in agreed *bubbles* (in time to come people will have to explain to subsequent generations the new meaning the word *bubble* took on this year). I expect other landmark historical events around this Christmas will also be referred to. Thrown in for good measure, it will be recalled that this was our *Brexit Christmas* (with the UK-EU trade deal agreed at the final hour). This year will also be remembered as the last Christmas of the strange era of the Trump Presidency in the USA, with all the stir surrounding the end of Donald Trump's tenure of office.

Just as Jesus came into the world at a time of great uncertainty, a really challenging period in ancient history, so we keep our liturgical commemoration of Christ's incarnation during another period of great uncertainty, a really challenging passage in the present world's history.

As we gather here tonight, it is consoling for us to remember that the One whose birth we celebrate has for name *Emmanuel: God-is-with-us*. The Lord is with all those who are spending this feast alone, cut off from social contacts, separated from loved ones.

The other name given to the One who has come to be with us is *Jesus: the One who saves*. Christ came to offer liberation, freedom from all that held people captive: freedom from their fears, their anxieties – our fears, our anxieties, everything that can be a source of trouble and concern for us.

We are reminded that the Lord first came to be with His people in a way that really connected Him to where folk were at. He comes again tonight in a way that really connects Him with where we are at this time. The Lord came in the past in vulnerability, as a little child. Just think of all the uncertainty that surrounded Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph struggled to find a secure place where He might be born. All they came up with was an outhouse of some sort – a place that was far from secure. It was in insecurity and uncertainty that Christ was welcomed into our world. He still comes in that way.

It is important to remember that the child born of Mary, the One whose birth Christians have celebrated for two millennia, is none other than *our Lord and our God*. The manner of Jesus' birth obliges us to modify many of our preconceived images of how God manifests Himself to us. What we are shown is that the Lord who came in the Christ-child of Bethlehem chose – and still chooses – to reveal Himself to our world as a naked and vulnerable God. Moreover, those upon whom God made Himself dependent on the night Jesus was born found themselves in a precarious and fragile situation. They were, when we think of it, just a young couple, starting out in life. Theirs was not an easy lot. They found themselves to be displaced persons when their time came for Mary to give birth. The story shows us how they were rendered totally reliant upon the charity and goodwill of absolute strangers to help see them

through. They found an innkeeper who offered them hospitality by providing them with very basic shelter: a stable with a manger in it. This was to be the place of welcome for the One whom we confess to be the Creator of heaven and earth.

What a wondrous act of love we are led to contemplate on this Holy Night!

Tonight we see how God came to be with His people as One fully human, choosing to enter into this world as a Newborn Infant, a little child, weak and helpless; a baby completely dependent upon His parents, just like every newborn infant who has to rely upon its carers to sustain its life, otherwise it would simply perish and die.

The child Jesus, God made man, chose to need what every human person born into this world needs if he or she is to experience well-being: warmth, food, touch, shelter, as well as the nursing care which offers comfort and reassurance.

The fact that the Infant Christ needed to be held close, to be soothed, to be wrapped in swaddling clothes – shown all these and many more signs of attention – is something that I believe can speak to us very powerfully this year.

At this time there are so many persons of all ages who long for tangible signs of other people's proximity, care and good will.

Right now, as I speak, I am aware that there are Covid19 sufferers who would deeply appreciate having someone by their side just to hold their hand, simply to signify to them that they are not alone, to manifest to them that someone is there with them and for them. All these months Health Care workers have had to do for those who were dying what their loved ones would have been doing for them under normal circumstances.

As well as those who are suffering from the present pandemic there are many other people who for different reasons find themselves isolated, sad, cut-off, alone, deeply troubled, profoundly pained.

That God Himself in the Child Jesus chose to experience real need, and accept to have to receive from others what was required to nurture His human existence, bears witness to His solidarity with us in our poverty, our helplessness, our weakness. It shows Him to be in compassionate communion with all people of every age and generation everywhere.

What the choice Christ made, in accepting to become dependent upon others, helps us understand is that when we are reduced to nothingness our *God is with us*. As the psalmist tells us: *He is there by our side, holding us by the hand*.

We can be sure that the Lord our God, whom we confess to be Creator of all that is, is with us tonight in our ordinariness, our frailty, our human limitations, our vulnerability, our nakedness, our suffering, our need for reassurance. He is with us in our pain and distress. He is with us in our loss. The Lord is with us in everything we experience, including those sentiments of anger which are wont to arise within us when we feel hurt and threatened and just cannot understand God's ways.

Is it not consoling for us to think that there is no absolutely no feeling, no emotion, within us with which the Lord cannot identify?

The manger scene, which is so central to our Christmas Night liturgy, invites us to approach our Saviour God – who came to us in the flesh of the Christ-child some two thousand years ago and who comes to us anew in this Christmas Eucharist – proposing that we allow ourselves to be fed and nourished by His very own life.

The fact that Jesus lay in the manger hints at His willingness to give Himself to and for us as food to nourish our lives. It points to and prepares us for the mystery we celebrate in this sacrament of the Eucharist.

In rather poetic lines one Christian teacher has declared: *The soft glow of the manger whispers to us to come and kneel down before our God.* I would say that the manger asks us to approach our God lying therein, with arms wide open to welcome us. Let us dare to approach Him totally unarmed, leaving aside all that makes us feel strong, self-sufficient, competent, powerful and wise. The Child-child invites us to look into His face and to recognise Him to be none other than our Saviour God.

What the contemplation of Christ's face reveals to us is that the Deity dared to become so small and fragile for our sakes... a weak, dependent, naked, powerless, little infant.

I believe that what the Lord wants to reveal to us as He looks out at us from the manger, seeking to touch our hearts and open them up to His gentle love for us, is this: that we are, all of us, just as frail and vulnerable as He was lying in the manger... and that this is the case no matter how materially or intellectually rich we may consider ourselves to be or others may imagine us to be.

Fundamentally, existentially, we are all of us limited creatures. Whether we realise it or not, we are all of us poor and needy creatures: men, women and children whose greatest longing and deepest hunger in life is for love.

It is to be hoped that our contemplation of the Christ-child in the heart of this night time our world is traversing, alongside all those personal reasons that may leave us feeling fearful and anxious, enduring suffering and pain, can and should be lived as God intended that we experience the whole of our existence: as a soft and tender blessing.

Lying in a manger what Jesus displays is that love is a gift which nourishes; that it is food to be received and shared. Our Eucharistic Table tonight is the manger to which we are invited to eat so that Christ may feed us with His very self.

What Jesus says to us as He lies in the manger, so helpless and so vulnerable, is that He wants to make us feel safe by drawing close to us and inviting us to draw close to Him.

We could say that Christ left His Father in heaven to invite us to allow Him to find and make His heaven within us.

Looking into the Nativity Scene, contemplating the little child at its centre, let us remember that in this infant what we have is, as the Anglican theologian/bishop John Pritchard puts it: *God's self-portrait glimpsed in the puckered vulnerability of a newborn baby.*

For me that insight ties in with what the American writer Annie Dillard states when she reminds us: *Christ is always found in our lives just as He was originally found: a helpless baby and in the straw who must be picked up and nurtured to maturity.*

On this Christmas night let us approach the crib to pick the Christ-Child up and take Him home with us.

Let us hold on to His coming and share Him with others, carrying Him forth from this place to all those people whom we will meet as we pursue life's journey – especially those with whom we are called to share our lives day after day.

Amen!