

The Nativity of Our Lord 2011.

The tension was extreme in Bethlehem that day. Imagine a census being imposed by an occupying force which meant that you had to travel to your place of birth to be registered. And there was more tension. Mary and Joseph found that there was no place for them at the inn. We like to think that the inn was full but that is not what St. Luke says. He is strangely silent. If we look at the rest of what St. Luke has to say it is more likely that there was no place for them because they were not of the right social standing.

And the tension was extreme on both the occasions I had the good fortune to visit Bethlehem this year. Extreme tension because the people who live there now are separated from the rest of the country and the world by a wall which causes bitter emotional, economic, psychological and health problems to the inhabitants.

On a night of celebration and great joy why do I start with mention of three sad human situations which describe political force and manipulation, exclusion and homelessness and injustice against a particular people? Apart from the fact that they are all about the place of Jesus' birth, the reason is to be found in Isaiah's proclamation that we have just heard that "the people that walked in darkness has seen a great light". Yes, the people that lived in Jesus' time and the people who live in the world now, live in darkness. The darkness of midnight, which we are fast approaching, is a sign of the darkness which touches every human life and which takes countless forms. It could be suffering, anxiety, fear, exploitation or the simple feeling that life is just too fast and too much or seems to have run out of all meaning. Perhaps the business of keeping everything together has become a burden too heavy to bear. It could be the darkness of greed, of starvation or conflict that scars so much of our planet.

Whichever it is tonight is a moment of celebration because Jesus is the light that comes to enter the darkness and overcome it. As St. John tells us in his Gospel, the light that Jesus is cannot be overcome by darkness. Mary and Joseph, for whatever reason, are excluded from the inn so that Mary gives birth in less than suitable surroundings. She gives birth to Jesus who is God and in fact the place, points to why tonight is so important. It is God who is born in the doubtful surrounds of the place where animals are kept, suffering the indignity of exclusion and social segregation. It is God, who in Jesus, humbles himself to the lowest point, so that he can join us in the business of being human, at the same time raising us and all that is ours to the dignity of God himself.

On this day we celebrate and give thanks for the fact that everything has changed and can change. If we feel humbled, if life seems dull and heavy, if health and vitality seem to be on the decline, if love and passion are consuming us with that bitter sweet sensation, if youth is offering us confusion and anxiety, if darkness is touching us in any of its forms, that is precisely where God is transforming and renewing us. The point is quite simply that God becomes human in Jesus so that as we enter into our humanity more deeply, whether in joy or in sorrow, we are drawing closer to God and therefore closer to our humanity, because the closer we are to God the more human we become. The fullness of life for us is sharing the life of God.

The Hampshire Chronicle offered some sad reading this week. Three out of four people interviewed were less than enthusiastic about Christ or the real meaning of Christmas. I found it sad because those who lack the enthusiasm of a relationship with Jesus and his disciples are missing so much. Jesus who is present among us and within us always; his Spirit which is the source of all renewal and new life is the

beginning and end of the human search. How many human lives are empty of meaning and purpose? How many discover that the power to buy and have what we like; the freedom to do as we please; the pursuit of pleasure in all its forms leads us nowhere except deeper frustration and emptiness. Jesus offers every human being the priceless gift of finding a life that is full of everything God is giving, but how many in our time turn their backs on it?

Mary wrapped Jesus in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. At the end of his life, Joseph of Arimathea wrapped the body of Jesus in a linen cloth and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. The birth and death of Jesus embrace the life of God in Jesus given for our good and the good of creation. Tonight we give thanks for such a great gift and resolve to respond in our lives with grateful acceptance because God is giving his gift of new life all the time. So, where do we begin?

St. Paul has told us that God's grace has made salvation possible for the whole human race and has taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God. The first challenge is to accept his saving gift into our lives in prayer and in trust. See our relationship with Jesus, the Son of Mary, as the highest good and greatest priority in our lives. Then we will be able to see with the eyes of faith how best to live our lives in response to his gift. Or, in other words, discover which things we must give up because they do not lead to God and therefore do damage.

St. Paul also tells us that God has renewed us with the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our Saviour. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us to create something new within us, not just once in a while, but all the time we have life. That Holy Spirit is the greatest possible gift and Christmas is the time to accept it with whole hearted gratitude.