

Homily: Christmas 2020

Amidst all that has and is going on, one way and another, and the fact that the last few nights have been very cloudy you may not have noticed a headline ‘Star of wonder to light up the sky this Christmas.’ This is about what is known as the Great Conjunction of planets, in this case bringing Venus and Jupiter in close alignment and creating an unusually bright light in the sky.

Was this what happened at the time of the census of Caesar Augustus? The closest approach of the two planets since 1226 took place on Monday evening. The Vatican, as many will know has quite an observatory and Jesuit Bro. Guy Consolmagno is the Church’s most eminent scientist and director of it. He asks “Is this really what the star of Bethlehem was? No one knows for sure, The important thing to remember is that the Star of Bethlehem is just a small part of the infancy narrative. The real point of the story isn’t the star it’s the baby.

That immediately put me in mind of something I read of a priest who was called to offer prayers at a breakfast meeting of business executives. There were powerful people, men and women of great authority, making vital decisions about profit margins, downsizing strategies and positioning their companies for new markets (not at all unlike today). However, when Anne-Marie, a vice-president and a new mum came into the room with her baby, everything stopped. However powerful, however focussed on their work and careers, these leaders were brought to silence by a baby as each one of them tried, as we all do, to be the one who most favourably attracted the child’s attention. This child – tiny, fresh and vulnerable –coaxed out a tenderness, attentiveness and affection that no amount of business success could ever match.

Isn’t that the mystery of Christmas? God had already sent so many truly important people to Israel, to humanity. There were kings, prophets, priests. Yet every overture was resisted and eventually rejected. With great and divine wisdom, God finally and ultimately bridged that gap to us by ending his son to us.

Pope Francis writes; ‘In Jesus God was a child, and in this way, he wished to reveal the greatness of his love by smiling and opening his arms to all. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to step out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became human in order to encounter every man and woman. We come to realise that so great is God’s love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him.

The gift of life in all its mystery, becomes all the more wondrous as we realise that the Son of Mary is the source and sustenance of all life. In Jesus, the Father has given us a brother who comes to seek us out whenever we are confused or lost, a loyal friend ever at our side. He gave us his Son who forgives us and frees us from our sins. When we place the infant Jesus in the manger the scene suddenly comes alive.

When Anne-Marie left the meeting with her baby, the gathering returned to business, although not “as usual” A vulnerability had entered the meeting room. A tender compassion had been coaxed from these executives. The issues and problems remained the same, but they were free, if they wanted to, to choose to deliberate differently.

Similarly, Christmas means God has been born into our world in a loving generous and nonviolent vulnerability. Christ’s Mass can make us different. More than mere sentiment, Christmas gives us permission to bear vulnerability, compassion and tenderness to all, as we proclaim, ‘Today a saviour has been born to us. He is Christ the Lord.’