

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson 25th December 2022 - Christmas Day

It's only a few weeks ago that I offered Mass with the pilgrims of our diocese at the shepherd's cave in the fields around Bethlehem. We did sing 'Adeste, fidelis,' including a verse about the shepherds, as well as 'O little town of Bethlehem.' A notice in the town says: 'Every day is Christmas in Bethlehem.'

Here the joy of anticipation of Christmas is blunted by many things, not least by the relentless commercialism that like almost everything else in life, is characterised by excess, and goes on for weeks if not months.

But more serious are the times we live in: the excess of the media spreading much gloom and doom about so much of life. Does it mean anything to speak of peace, when war in Ukraine, and elsewhere affects so many across the world? The sheer number of refugees and lives devastated by war.

Then there are the many personal tragedies; the death of loved ones; lost marriages, broken families, poor health, redundancies, lost time, broken promises, tiredness and frustration. A world as ever in chaos. It is worth remembering what St John Henry Newman wrote in 1874 "We are apt to consider no time so perilous as our own."

But the question is posed: how do we celebrate the birth of a redeemer in a world which looks shockingly unredeemed, and with hearts that mostly feel heavy and unredeemed?

The Christmas story is not easily made credible. Who can still believe that God came down from heaven, took on human flesh, ultimately conquered all suffering and altered the entire course of human history?

We can! That is our Catholic faith!

O great mystery, words our choir sing at Midnight following the gospel. The redemptive power of Christmas is not a magical event.

Its centre speaks of humiliation, of pain and of forced fleeing which is not unlike that being experienced by all the victims of injustice and war on the planet. It mirrors too the pain that is experienced within our own wounded hearts. Incarnation is not yet the Resurrection. Flesh in Jesus, as in us, is human flesh, vulnerable, weak, incomplete, needy, painfully full of limit, suffering.

Christmas celebrates Christ's birth into these things, not his removal of them. Christ redeems limit, evil, sin and pain. They are not abolished.

For this very reason we can celebrate Christ's birth without in any way denying or trivialising the real evil in our world and the very pain in our lives. Christmas is a challenge to celebrate while still in pain.

The incarnate God is called Emmanuel, a name which means "God is with us." That fact does not mean immediate festive joy. Our world remains unwhole and wars, strikes, selfishness and bitterness linger.

For Christians, just as for everyone else, there will be incompleteness, illness, senseless hurt, broken dreams, cold, hunger, lonely days of bitterness. Reality has its harshness and Christmas does not ask us to make-believe.

What the Incarnation promises is God's presence in our daily lives. This presence redeems because the sense that God is with us is what ultimately empowers us to give up bitterness, forgive and move beyond cynicism and bitterness.

When God is with us, then pain and happiness are not mutually exclusive and the agonies and riddles of life do not exclude deep meaning and deep joy.

As the late Jesuit Cardinal Avery Dulles put it, “The Incarnation does not provide us with a ladder by which to escape from the ambiguities of life and scale the heights of heaven. Rather it enables us to burrow deep into the heart of planet earth and find it shimmering with divinity.”

The sense that God is with us in our lives, in our joys as well as in our shortcomings is Good News. The Word became flesh.

O great mystery. That’s an incredible thing, which must be celebrated with lights and food & drink and songs of joy.

Let nothing remove Christmas ‘Joy to the world.’

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