

CHRISTMAS 2020 in Lockdown: Reflecting on Christmas.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD .. AND THE WORD WAS GOD.

This is the fifteenth time I have addressed you at Christmas and each year the drift of my message has been much the same because the appointed Gospel texts and their message are likewise unchanging. But this year is unique in all our experiences – indeed one paper has already predicted that it will go down in history as “The Christmas that never was” not so much because of the liturgical limitations, but principally because of enforced exclusion of our families from our celebrations both in church and around the family table.

Rightly we approach the feast with joy, but rightly too we reflect that there are few if any earthly joys that are not tinged in some way with sorrow. Even the birth of Jesus was into a world in which crucifixion was the routine Roman punishment for anyone deemed to be challenging the authority of the state. I wish for all of you that this feast day be a blessed one in the more profound meaning of that word, in spite of the lockdown.

You may remember that last year I quoted G.K.Chesterton’s assertion that went something like this: “Of all the mysteries of our faith the Incarnation (literally the becoming human of God himself) is by far the most momentous in its sheer audacity and magnitude and, yes, its unbelievability as a concept. But in my experience (that is Chesterton’s experience), once you have got your head around that one, the other challenging propositions, whether transubstantiation or the Virgin Birth or even the Resurrection, fall into the category of minor difficulties by comparison.”

What I think he is saying is that the essential truth which we accept on trust rather than proof, that God revealed himself in our world by his Incarnation as one of us, becoming a fully human being, is neither a legend to be explained away nor a clinical report to be dissected. It is a mystery of faith, certain in its essential meaning but veiled in its manner of execution. What concerns us here today in this assembly of the faithful, is not *how* God came among us but *that* God came among us. Let us at least hold fast to that.

About 18 months ago there seemed to be genuine surprise when attention was drawn in the papers to the void left in the minds of our young people by the sorry state of religious education in the nation's schools: a blinkered view, it was said, of a world which dismisses anything to do with religion as a relic of the infancy of mankind, unworthy of serious study ...something peripheral to the main purposes of schooling. And yet survey after survey shows that most teenagers are interested in the question of the existence and nature of God, the debates on our understanding of creation, the tension (if any) between the Big Bang and the Genesis text, and the all important question of what happens when we die, and how we find a sense of purpose and meaning in a life which may already have witnessed much sadness, suffering and tragedy.

In this context I like to quote the reassuring remark of St John Henry Newman when he made the enigmatic statement that in relation to the essential truths of our faith “a thousand difficulties don’t make a doubt” and how Jesus in St Mark’s Gospel responded positively to the man of whom he had asked “Do you believe?” and who answered “Lord, I do believe, help thou my unbelief.”

So what is our resolution to be for 2021? Is it indeed possible for you or me to effectively

witness to the kingdom of God upon an earth which has become so alarmingly godless in its aspirations. I think it is, and I believe that the image of the crib in Bethlehem, the humble origins from which the God of heaven himself chose to embark upon his mission of mercy, is a powerful guide to the way ahead. Few of us are called to be fiery prophets or are likely to become famous in the ranks of the great and the good - but we can all see in the lowly cattle shed an image of quiet fidelity, the source of that enduring inspiration in the Church of Mary and Joseph whose recorded words and actions are so very few, and of the shepherds who came to adore their new-born Lord and then went away to spread the good news.

An American Jesuit recently put it neatly by saying that it is our destiny to *become by grace what Christ is by nature*. It is as if we are being dared to believe much more than a few faith statements, because not believing raises more problems than it solves. After all, Christianity makes the stupendous claim that as the fullness of God is shown in his self-emptying — his being born into our world — so our human destiny is to be raised up to nothing less than sharers in his divine life.

Father Charles