

Homily for Christmas 2017

Christmas celebrates the birth of a child. We often speak of the miracle of birth. That doesn't mean it is a one off. Quite the opposite. We all experience birth. It is the most common experience of all humanity. We may not be aware of it but as you look around each of us shares in a unique beginning. These days medical science can predict with amazing accuracy so much of what the new child will look like, its characteristics, and what genetic problems it might have.

That is amazing enough. But even if a child is conceived in a test tube, or whatever, nothing prepares you for the wonder of the new person that enters the world. The most common event in every human life throughout history remains a wondrous mystery. And for all our knowledge of the beginnings of life we cannot predict the life story that will unfold. Each is on a unique journey.

Another thing about the birth of a child is that parents give the child a name. We each have been called forth as it were by our name. We quickly identify with our name. A small child responds to a smile and its name. Jesus was given a name with a specific meaning, "God saves". He became what his name says. He became the Saviour. Our names might not have a specific meaning originally but in an uncanny way our lives give a new meaning to the name we are given. Our name takes on our personality as other people address us with it and we relate to them. It is often recorded in the bible that people are given names or that their names are changed. Hanna gave the name Samuel to her son, "Gift of God". Abram becomes Abraham, Saul become Paul, and so on. In traditional cultures names really did say who a person is to become or what their life is all about. We do not have that kind of clarity about ourselves these days.

All this is to say that the miracle of birth is much more than a miracle. Our lives tell a story of which no one can predict the outcome. But our Christian name given in Baptism does tell us who God calls us to become, God's own child. In a shifting culture where genders are said to be not fixed and a fast changing world where there are no definite boundaries or life long jobs we still celebrate Christmas. And even though we are excited by the ever changing world we live in we still hunger for an inner peace and stability on which to build our lives our families and our cities. Where can it be found? We do have something to offer. It is what we celebrate today.

We may be dismayed that Christianity, for all Jesus stands for, can still be a source of evil. But really we have been told this would happen. The bible tells a story not of a perfect people of God. It is the story of struggle. Failure often but always redemption. The bible recounts again and again that God's people sin. They betray the covenant. The bible tells that dark side of God's people to contrast it with the sheer grace of salvation. So we are not surprised that we sin, both individually and as a community. We fail and fail often. We are here not because we are perfect but because we believe that the struggle is worth the effort. And within that history of struggle greatness emerges. There are saints aplenty. God's grace is given in abundance. Christmas reassures us of that.

That grace is revealed in the wonder of the child born in Bethlehem. Even if today the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is largely deserted because of conflict between Jew and Arab Christmas is here today. We gather in solidarity with Christians everywhere suffering persecution. We gather in solidarity with people whose lives are disrupted, damaged or destroyed by war and hunger, climate change, storm and earthquake. Because sheer statistics should not prevent us from recognising the uniqueness of each person born of woman. We offer what little we can today in our prayer that God's justice may flourish.

Christmas is a time for wonder however we celebrate it. Find a way to pause this Christmas. I hope you find a moment in your family to ponder the wonder of each birth, your birth and your children's birth, your siblings birth. We also and importantly pause to wonder at our life together. For even in spite of ourselves we carry a hope that cannot be quenched.

Fr Graham Gatehouse