

Christmas Eve 2020

What are your plans for tomorrow and the coming weekend? Are you being asked to spend with folk you ordinarily wouldn't mix with? Or have your travel plans been upset by the ongoing public health crisis? Will your celebrations be tinged with sadness as you look back over what has been for most of us a difficult year filled with challenges? If your answer to these questions and others like them is yes, then can I assure you that you are probably entering into the real meaning of this feast.

Most of us have never experienced a year quite like 2020 and our reactions to it have been mixed. We have perhaps found ourselves frustrated by limitations placed on us, our gatherings or our travel. Some have been angered by decisions made by those in government or those in positions of authority. We've been tempted to look to conspiracy theories believing we have been duped by someone, or to the heavens - believing God has visited something upon us or we've simply wished the year over.

None of these reactions have reality at their heart; they are simply ways in which we can let off steam. Because what has occurred is a result of being alive, being part of the created order *as it now is*; what has happened has forced us back onto reality and yes it is painful, untidy but in this great tradition it is from anguish that comes joy and all that is life affirming.

The narratives describing the birth of Jesus, whilst they have their mystical elements: dreams, visitation by angels, miraculous conceptions, are at their heart about reality. They are about a young couple no doubt filled with hope for their future lives together, they are about the doubts and fears around conception, social mores and expectations, the changing of plans as they are required to travel to Bethlehem, sudden homelessness, being surrounded by strangers and then the fear of authorities driving them into exile. And of course the quest for meaning in it all; Mary pondered all these things.

This is a very adult perspective on Christmas which puts paid to the rather commonly heard: 'it's all about the children.' Christmas helps us understand reality, and it says to us that despite this we can be hopeful. It is *the* narrative that drives us back to reality, to real life, helps us navigate the issues that we face, and then says to us within all this there is a joy to be found that far exceeds that which can be found by the escapism that we so often crave.

What we are doing when we celebrate Christmas is not escapism but participation. Tonight we are not passive observers, we are participating in the great narrative of life. The shepherds are often seen as observers, with a bit part to play. But this is fail to appreciate their significance. These are ordinary folk, they are not mystics, or priests or scribes, they are working folk eking out a living caring, probably, for someone else's sheep. But suddenly their lives are changed their initial terror and amazement is changed into enchantment. And their reaction is worship. There is a sense in which they have discovered the very meaning behind their lives. Ordinary lives become transfigured, the shepherds reveal to us the

very meaning and destiny of life to... worship. Now we are getting close to very meaning of Christmas, to reality and the meaning of life.

When we understand what those shepherds were doing we understand what we too are called to do and we begin gradually to realise that worship is indeed what life is about. It infects our ethic, it is revealed in the way we treat one another, it is revealed in the way we care for the created order. Worship is what beauty and joy are all about, the essence of art and music and poetry is worship.

All of these things are about the reality of life. They engage us at the very deepest levels of our being, this is what humanity is all about. The issues that currently beset us are due, in part, to our inability, our unwillingness to worship. To give true worth. The church simply calls it sin. Worship, to reflect to God, God's very self, revealed in person of Christ, and through him in us, to reflect to each other God's love and to reflect God's ongoing creativity to the environment which sustains us. It is my hope that the events of this past year have awakened in us a renewed sense of that which is due true worth, a sense of what is indeed most real.

And, that we might find that reality in the love of God, who comes among us, and calls us, calls upon us simply to be like those first shepherds, speaking of the wonder of the story we are participating in and praising and glorifying God in all that we do say. This is our call, our destiny and indeed our hope.

A very happy and holy Christmas to you all and a new year filled with renewed hope and joy. Amen.