

**CHRISTMAS 2022: OUR LORD'S BIRTH = HUMANITY'S HOPE.**

***Priest normally chooses one of 3 Masses: Night-time, Dawn or Day-time.***

***1st Readings: all use Isaiah; the theme: fresh hope and its fulfilment;***

***2nd Readings: Night & Dawn: from St Paul to Titus: Grace given in Jesus;***

***Day Mass uses Hebrews 1:1-6: Jesus' place in history of Salvation.***

***Gospels: Night+Dawn: Jesus' birth & Shepherds' visit; Day: John chap 1.***

One of the problems of being fairly deaf is that of receiving important communication. I don't mean having a chat and hearing what the other person is saying, or trying to make out the garbled words of the many people with "authentic" regional accents now on the BBC. I do mean being able to understand important information from people on the phone, when the other person has no idea what it means to be hard-of-hearing. This (for people like me) can be both frustrating and serious. Attempting to get some people on the other end of the line to say vital points clearly can be a difficult task!

What has this complaint to do with Christmas? Well, in the day-time Mass, the gospel is about God communicating clearly with us. It's not the "nice" gospel of the other Masses – there is no mention of shepherds, angels, Mary, Joseph - not even the little donkey! Instead, we have the mightiest chapter in the whole Bible: John 1. Here, the writer shows how, in Jesus, God stepped into human history: the "Word" became flesh, and lived among us. This "Word" is the second Person of the Trinity – the Old Testament idea of "Wisdom" – the creative force sharing divine status with God the Father. There was always a problem in the Old Testament of the Creator seeming remote – a force "out there", that had little link with the humans he had made. The early Christians came to see that in Jesus of Nazareth, this creative force, which had existed with God the Father from all eternity, had now taken human flesh, sharing our life physically on this planet. The word "flesh" doesn't just mean 'human': the Greek word is "sarx"; the Latin word is "caro"; both mean the full range of human problems, including temptation. (Think of "carnal" from the Latin, and you get the point.) In Jesus, God communicates with us in the most intimate and clear-cut way – sharing messy human life. No room for doubt here!

If all this sounds too remote and academic, just think of the Christmas crib, and you'll see what it means in practice. One of the easiest-to-sing carols puts it well: in "*See amid the winter's snow*", we read: Verse 2: "Lo, within a manger lies / he who built the starry skies; / he who, throned in heights sublime / sits amid the cherubim." Verse 5: "Sacred infant, all divine / what a

tender love was thine / thus to come from highest bliss / down to such a world as this!” All good Christmas carols stress the contrast between the perfection of God’s creative power shared by the “Word” from eternity, and the scruffiness of poverty in first-century Palestine that Jesus had to share. That was true love!

In “The Divine Office”, or Breviary, which clergy & professed religious say each day (many laity use it too), the Office of Readings for Christmas Day uses a sermon by Pope St Leo the Great. He makes two very good points. The first is that Christmas should include everybody, because we all need the grace God offers us. I’ll re-interpret his words to relate to those who might attend church at Christmas. We welcome regular, practising Christians, with the hope that their keenness will grow even sharper. We welcome those on the fringe of the Church – perhaps only going at this time of the year - with the hope that they will make a more serious commitment. We also welcome those with no belief, who may come only for musical or family reasons, with the hope that they may think about the possibility that there is a God who calls them.

His second point is more blunt: “”O Christian, be aware of your nobility – it is God’s own nature that you share. Do not, then, by an ignoble life fall back into your baseness.” One of the sadder aspects (to this old geezer!) of the pre-Christmas blitz of TV adverts is the obsession with gambling and booze. When misused, both destroy family life. I think (at least, I hope) that most people are aware of their human dignity; for religious believers, this comes from our mental abilities, which reflect God’s life in us. It is a tragedy that so many lives are blighted by various addictions – and I suggest that any weakness that we allow to control adult decision-making can be counted as an ‘addiction’.

But let’s be optimistic! This weekend, we celebrate the fact that our God wanted to be so close to us, to “speak” or communicate with us, that he became one of us, in that baby of Bethlehem. St Luke’s mention of the birth and the very picturesque images of it in Christian art leave no room for doubt that Jesus was born into difficulty. If we imagine the Christmas story as merely ‘Episode One’ of a serial, we see how it is followed by Jesus’ public life, ministry, arrest, crucifixion and eventual resurrection. Despite what some people think should have happened, Jesus did not come to remove wondrously human suffering and sinfulness. He himself had to feel the effects of both – no magic wand was waved to keep him safe from them. You and I will have our share of life’s troubles, but at least we know that, in Jesus, God shares them, too. I wish all readers a Happy Christmas. *Fr Jim Dunne.*