



Homily for the Mass of Christmas Night

24 December 2017

St. David's Cathedral, Cardiff

Archbishop George Stack

Mrs C. F. Alexander was a wonderful Victorian hymn writer. Among her famous hymns are “All things bright and beautiful”; “There is a Green Hill far away” and “St. Patrick’s Breastplate”. Perhaps her most famous hymn is the one we have just sung tonight “Once in Royal David’s City”.

Like all of us, she knew how painful it was to lose a loved one through death. Whilst she mourned the loss of people she loved, she could still write with faith:

*And our eyes at last shall see him
Through his own redeeming love;
For that child so dear and gentle,
Is our Lord in heaven above:
And He leads his children on,
To the place where he has gone.*

At Christmas, we inevitably think of those whom we have loved and have gone before us. Through our faith in the saving power of the death and resurrection of Jesus we believe that those who have died go no further from us than God. And God is very close – especially as we look at God’s Word, made flesh, comes into this world full of the vulnerability.

The poet John Betjeman put it well when he wrote:

And is it true, that most amazing tale of all:

That God was man in Palestine, and lives today in bread and wine.

The scriptures and the Fathers of the Church put it better:

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and in my flesh, I shall see God” says Job. (Job 19:24-25)

St. Augustine wrote in the 4th century God has promised us *“The joy of seeing his face”*. St. John of the Cross in the 16th century calls out *“What gladness for him who is able to see God with his own eyes”*.

When I was at Westminster Cathedral I worked closely for ten years with Cardinal Basil Hume. Two weeks before he died, he was summoned to Buckingham Palace by the Queen to be made a Companion of Honour. The Queen asked him what was it like to be so close to death. He gave a wonderful reply. *“Well, Ma’am”,* he said *“it feels like one is sitting in the front row of a theatre waiting for the curtain to go up on what one knows is going to be the most extraordinary spectacle one has ever seen”*.

At a funeral in the Cathedral Cardinal Hume once preached *“The judgement is nothing more, or less, than my whispering in the ear of God things I could never tell other people about myself. Perhaps I could not even tell myself”*. What a comfort, what a relief to be able to know myself as God knows me, see myself as He sees me, a person of infinite value, of infinite worth, infinitely forgivable, if only I can learn to love, value and forgive myself. This is one of the great lessons of the Incarnation.

On our Christmas trees here in the Cathedral we have hung stars with the names of those who have died in order to remind us to pray for them. The

stars are reminders that those who have died are now being illuminated by the light of God's love, seeing themselves as God sees them. The Christmas star hovering over the stable at Bethlehem reminds us that, like the Wise Men, we must follow the star, follow the light which is so often shrouded in the midst of darkness and confusion. We remember the words of St. Paul: *"Now we see in a glass darkly. Then we shall see face to face"*. (1 Cor.13:12)

Unfortunately, Mrs Alexander didn't write the carol "We Three Kings of Orient are". But the chorus following each verse could have been hers:

O Star of wonder, star of night.

Star of royal beauty bright.

Westward leading, still proceeding,

Guide us to thy Perfect Light.