



Homily for Second Mass of Christmas

Cardiff Cathedral

Friday 25th December 2020

Archbishop George Stack

I should have done my homework more carefully! The other night I was invited by a family to watch a children's' nativity play on BBC television where everything goes wrong. Now we have all been to nativity plays in primary schools where halos fall off angels, wings get broken off, children forget their words and the shepherds steal the gold brought by the kings. But nothing prepared me for "The Show Goes Wrong – The Nativity Story". This was no children's' nativity. This was a cynical caricature, a deliberate distortion and a trivialisation of the central mystery of our faith. To quote the publicity which I read afterwards: *"It's really an excuse for conflagrations, collapsing scenery, falling angels and two actors squabbling inside a donkey"*. I wondered afterwards (it is good to wonder at Christmas) if any other of the world's great religions were portrayed in this way, whether Judaism, Islam or Hinduism, what the reaction would be?

Don't get me wrong. I love comedy! "Dad's Army" and "Only Fools and Horses" are among my favourites. And even the pandemic has inspired many Christmas cartoons which contain a deep meaning – as the best cartoons do. My favourite is of Joseph, seeing the three Magi appearing at the door of the stable, and clearly thinking of the 'rule of six' does some quick calculations and exclaims *"You are from three independent royal households and the baby counts as three"*.

“The baby counts as three” – Father Son and Spirit. The eternal Word made Flesh, Emmanuel, God is with us.

The beautiful Christmas carol puts it so well:

O Holy child of Bethlehem,

Descend to us, we pray.

Cast out our sin and enter in,

Be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels

The great glad tidings tell:

O come to us, abide with us,

Our Lord Immanuel.

Descend to us. Come to us. Be born in us. Why? Because as we are told in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs “*Where there is no vision the people perish*”. (Prov.29:18) We are given that vision through the communication of God’s life, God’s love, God’s forgiveness, God’s salvation. All revealed and communicated to us, and in us, through Jesus Christ His Son. Even when that message is not heard, is misunderstood, is rejected by hanging him on a cross, Jesus goes on

revealing, goes on loving, goes on forgiving – the key to his rising from the dead bringing us with him. Eternity now for everyone.

Communication of this truth and vision lie at the heart of the Christmas story. Communication is a word very close to communion – joining with. We receive Jesus in Holy Communion, certainly. But equally we are received by Him into Communion with the very life of God Himself. *“The divine became human so that humans might become divine”*. How painful it is this Christmas that many of us are not able to communicate in the usual ways with our loved ones. Zoom and face book don’t have quite the same impact as being physically present to those we love.

Sad too that the more ‘connected’ our world becomes the more lonely and isolated many people are, not least through poverty and hunger which have been revealed during this pandemic. Thanks be to God for the heroic work of health workers and teachers, for the untold numbers of schools and parishes and volunteers who have communicated compassion and love and food and money to communicate God’s healing love to those in need. Thank God that “we here” to keep alive the Christmas story, not “once upon a time” or a disaster ridden nativity play. The poet John Betjeman summed it up so well:

And is it true? And is it true,
That most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A baby in an ox's stall?
The maker of the stars and sea
Become a child on earth for me?
And is it true? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissue fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things.
No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the shaking steeple bells
Can with this single truth compare:
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in bread and wine.
