

The Nativity of our Lord – Midnight Mass
(Isaiah 9:1-7 / Titus 2:11-14 / Luke 2:1-14)
25.12.2016

There was nothing less than authentic in Jesus. There was no pretence in His way of being. His coming into the world was stripped of all trappings. There was nothing there to impress those who saw Him on the first Christmas night.

Those who came to pay homage to God-made-man in the Christ-child of Bethlehem, saw Him lying in a manger – an eating trough.

What a vulnerable way by which to appear in our world!

The Lord always comes to us in ways that do not menace us. God-made-man in Jesus chose to come into this world in a way that put His life at risk.

We know how the helpless child of Bethlehem chose to remain vulnerable, disarmed and exposed throughout His whole life.

At the end of His earthly life, God-made-man in Christ-Jesus allowed Himself to be devoured by humanity's violence, but not before making the gift of His body and blood – giving Himself as food.

Jesus made a gift of His life before it was robbed from Him, when He offered Himself to His disciples as the bread of life.

What we see happen at Bethlehem (a place-name that means *the house of bread*) – when Jesus is laid in the manger – prefigures the Eucharistic gift He made of Himself when He said to His disciples: *Take this bread, take and eat it, this is my body given for you.*

The Christ-child whom we are invited to contemplate, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, is none other than the one who later on is seen to be wrapped in linen cloths and laid in the tomb.

Look closely at the icon of the Nativity which is here in the church. What you see there is that iconography depicts the cloths in which the infant was wrapped in exactly the same way as it depicts the body of the Crucified Christ wrapped in the grave clothes in which Jesus' corpse was enshrouded before it was laid in the tomb.

Moreover, the crib of the icon of the Nativity is nothing other than a small hewn stone coffin (a sarcophagus) of the sort in which corpses were laid in Jesus' time.

If the Advent liturgy hailed the One whose coming we celebrate tonight more than once as *the great king*, the *mighty ruler of the nations*, the Infant Jesus is not seen to come to us bedecked in royal garments of fine linen and embroidered robes, but wrapped in all humility. Humble vulnerability was to be the clothing in which Jesus wrapped Himself throughout His whole earthly life.

He still comes to us clothed in that way today.

Christ's coming to us in this way, divested of all pretence, challenges us to present ourselves before others in the same way – in humble nakedness, we could say.

The Nativity scene – as indeed that of Calvary too – reminds us that the Lord comes to us in humble circumstances: in humble nakedness.

It is always in this way that Christ presents Himself to us.

This reminds us that Jesus is to be found in the very ordinary circumstances of our lives.

The Lord of heaven comes to earth over and over again in the ordinariness of life.

It is here that He waits for us and wants us to recognise Him.

A hallmark of Christ's identity is that it is always discreet and poor.

He stands before us vested in the robes of a mendicant begging for our attention – one thinks

of the parable of the poor man Lazarus who lay at the rich man's doorstep waiting for a sign of favour.

Christ awaits us in all those who are cry out for a little sign of our favour.

The Lord is there, waiting for us to welcome Him, in our spouse or loved one who just wants us to acknowledge their presence by our side; He is there in our elderly parent or relative whom we neglect to visit as often as we should; He is there in those persons who hunger for our affection or simply a recognition that they exist; He is there in the friend who has been there for us in hard times whom we can tend to forget when all goes well for us.

Christ comes to us, He awaits us and wants us to reach out to Him with charity, in the refugees who have come to our western countries seeking asylum, fleeing violence and oppression in their own lands of origin. Christ is there in these people – whatever their religion.

The Lord is already there and serving us in the migrant workers whose presence in our country's workforce some of us may even be tempted to resent.

Christ is close to us, and He wants to be closer to Him, in those we may be holding at a distance for various reasons – often simply because of their difference to us: difference of background, social class, education, political opinion, sexual orientation, culture, religious belief etc.

In so many ordinary ways the Lord comes to us. In so many simple ways He awaits that we be present to Him.

Jesus was born into the ordinary. It is always in this context that we find Him.

We need not look to the spectacular to find Christ, but to the everyday circumstances of our lives.

The Lord will be as present to you in your homes when you go back there tonight as He was present to you here in this Sacred Liturgy. He is to found in your kitchens and at your dining tables each and every day.

If, at His first coming into the world, God-made-man came as a helpless infant, just think of some of the ways He revealed Himself, even after His glorious resurrection. It still wasn't in splendour and might that the Risen Lord appeared, but again robed in humility. He was taken to be a gardener by Mary of Magdala; He was taken for someone cooking breakfast on the shore by Peter; He was taken to be just a fellow traveller – someone met by chance, along the road – by the Emmaus pilgrims.

Things haven't changed that much in two thousand years. Seldom does Jesus meet our expectations by coming to us robed in glory. Christ still comes to us wearing such things as gardening clothes, a cook's apron, walking shoes, an anorak.

The greatness of our God is revealed in the smallness of a newborn infant. This should lead us to see that it is to the small things in life that we should look and to the seemingly little ones that we should pay attention.

Frequently, we look for God in the wrong way and not in the right places. We are not alone in this.

Even those who had journeyed for some years with Jesus during His earthly life were still getting it wrong after His resurrection. At the Ascension those privileged witnesses who had seen the Risen Lord ascend to the heights had to hear these words of reprimand: *Why look into the clouds, why look to the heights, why keep your gaze fixed on the sky?*

Look down!

If the apostle Paul reminds us to *think of and look to heavenly things*, our contemplation of

the *things above* must not be a cop-out. We must also look to the things and to the people of this earth. It is on earth that Christ is to be found; it is here below that your God awaits our attention.

Our God in Christ-Jesus is a *down to earth* God; He became incarnate in order to be with us. He remains incarnate, He stays with us, in all those who are animated by His very own breath of life.

Yes, our great God is One who comes to us in the ordinary, for that is where love comes to us, that is where love reveals itself to us: in the ordinary ... in and through ordinary people.

Let me leave the pen-ultimate word tonight to a spiritual writer whom I appreciate greatly – Ronald Rolheiser. He reminds us of something vital when he writes: *Love is a thing that happens in ordinary places – in kitchens, at tables, in bedrooms, in workplaces, in families, in the flesh. God abides in us when we abide there. Through the Incarnation, God crawls into ordinary life and invites us to meet Him there.*

My own last word tonight is nothing other than the formulation of this wish: that all of us who are here for this Solemn liturgy on this Christmas Night may go forth from this church to meet the Lord in the ordinary circumstance of our lives, in the kinds of places Rolheiser named for us.

Even more than that, my wish for us is that we may we bring Christ to all the ordinary places where are led to go.

May we bring the Lord into the this world afresh this Christmas!

When we do that, then we open up the possibility for others to encounter Him. The challenge for you and me tonight is to leave this place aware that our mission is to be a living proclamation of the gospel.

This Christmas may others meet Jesus in and through each one of us, just as we are called to meet Him afresh in and through every person who comes our way.