

Christmas Night
25.12.2018

During our Advent journey we heard scriptural and liturgical texts speak to us of marvellous signs being made manifest in the heavens and on earth; we heard these same texts call us upon us to wait for *the great and wonderful day of the Lord's appearing*. Having heard this call, now in the heart of this Christmas night, we are invited to celebrate God's coming among us in the simplicity of a vulnerable infant, the child of Mary, born in the humblest of circumstances in the *little town of Bethlehem*. God's great sign is here revealed to be stark simplicity; God's great sign is this little child. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI: *God's sign is that He makes Himself small for us. This is how He reigns. He does not come with power and outward splendour. He comes as a baby – defenceless and in need of our help.*

The One whose coming we celebrate is called *our peace*. The prophet foretold: *He will bring about peace on the whole earth*. The angels' song at the time of His birth – with its resounding chorus: *Peace on earth* – points to the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. The sceptic might ask: *How can a defenceless infant bring about a peace which history shows us mighty armies have to fight long and hard to attain?* In response to that question, I dare to retort: *Have you ever contemplated a little child, reaching out to you with open arms?* The gesture of outstretched arms – so often witnessed in small, trusting, infants – is a plea for attention which has the knack of winning over those to whom the child beckons; in a strange way, a little infant reigns supreme, leading all around into the mystery of love. The infant manages to conquer us. A defenceless baby manages to disarm those who see it lying there in its manifest vulnerability; a baby mellows the heart of all; it warms the onlooker within awakening feelings of gentle communion, sentiments of deep peace. The gesture of the infant of Bethlehem moves our hearts; it gives a glimpse into the wonder of God's love. We recognise in it nothing less than a reflection of divine love robed in humility; majesty clothed in the nakedness of fragile human flesh. God's greatness comes to us in the child born in such humble conditions, wrapped in the swaddling clothes of vulnerability, weakness, poverty and need.

Not only does the little child of Bethlehem reveal to us who and what God is, but also who and what we are, who and what we are called to be, made as we are in God's image and likeness. This child reveals to us that in essence our God is love. He reminds us that we are called to be as loving as the One we contemplate. The Christ-child shows us that we were made by love and for love.

Love!...

Paradoxically, love both enriches and impoverishes us.

Looking at all things, looking at every person – ourselves included – through the lens of God's own loving regard upon humanity and this world in which we live, we are given to understand the truth of the words spoken by the adult Jesus in the Beatitudes wherein He proclaimed: *How blessed – that's to say, how loved they know themselves to be – those who recognise that they are poor.*

If we are to live happy, contented, lives, if we are to be at peace, it is indispensable for us to know who and what we are in God's eyes; just how he sees us.

We were reminded of who and what we are fundamentally in God's eyes by the words of that very beautiful Gregorian chant – the Christmas Introit – which had us sing a little earlier tonight: *Dominus dixit ad me, filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te... The Lord said to me:*

you are my child, today I have begotten you. This liturgical text – lines from Psalm 2 – affirmed for us who and what we are in God’s eyes; how He sees us. We are all God’s children, His beloved, who have been begotten by Him – not only once, at our physical birth, but with every breath we breathe. We are called to recognise that at each moment of our existence that we are sustained in being by God’s love.

Moreover, we are assured that we are lovable simply because God first loved us. *Period!*... as the Americans say. We are lovable just because God loves us. That’s it. *Full stop!*

An invitation comes with our coming to recognise that God loves us. It is the invitation to allow ourselves to be loved by Him... and by others too. The call addressed to each one of us at the heart of this Holy Night boils down to this: *Beloved, allow yourself to be loved!* How difficult many of us find it hard to credit that call and to respond to that call. The awareness of our poverty, our weakness, our struggle to live the lives we would like to; our frequent falls and failures; our fickleness and inconstancy; our disappointments and deceptions... all these things, along with so much else, has us ask ourselves: *How could God – who really knows me through and through – love me as I am?* And, by extension, we wonder: *How could anyone else, who truly knew me, really love me?*

According to the criteria of our own self-assessment, many – and maybe even most – of us find so much in our lives that is unacceptable that we don’t dare to believe in the depth of God’s love for us. If this is how we are with God, the same will be true when it comes to our relationships with other people. We will struggle to believe that anyone could ever really love us as we are.

When the Lord calls us *His beloved* – and when others call us *their beloved*; when our God tells us that He takes great pleasure in us and others do so too; when the Lord declares that He takes great delight in us and others echo similar sentiments we are left feeling embarrassed.

We would want to have things to present to the Lord and to these kind people to make them truly pleased with us. We would like to be without wrinkle, stain or blemish; we would like to be without fault, failing or sin. We find it hard to accept that no antecedent beauty enamours us to the Lord our God. We would prefer to be perfect, than to be as we are: flawed and fallible.

Perhaps we need to realise that what draws forth love from God’s heart in our regard is precisely what we see revealed in His Only Begotten Son, lying in the manger: poverty, weakness, vulnerability. We see these things to be defects, states of being to hide and be ashamed of, whereas God sees them as nothing to be embarrassed about. Indeed, we could say, He sees them as worthy gifts to offer. If this is how God came into this world to offer Himself to us, when He espoused our humanity, why wouldn’t we dare present ourselves before Him robed in these humble garments?

One great Christian witness, Saint Paul, understood this when he exclaimed that he dared to *boast of his weakness.*

I find words of the English Dominican friar – Simon Tugwell, O.P. – greatly consoling. Just the other week I turned to a few lines from Tugwell’s book on the Beatitudes – a book which my late Dominican aunt offered me when I was a novice monk. Tugwell challenges us as follows: *We must learn the art of the weak... of non-achievement, of being able to cope with the knowledge of our own poverty and helplessness, without trying to escape from it into something we can accept more easily. We must know that it is even in that poverty and*

helplessness that God sees us with love, even with approbation... God never says to us, 'I want you to be something else', without also saying to us, 'I love you as you are'.

Tugwell's words make it clear that it is not that God doesn't want to see us make progress or achieve betterment in our lives. There is always room for conversion and change. But, the starting point for each and every one of us – even as we may be hearing the call to a fuller and better life tonight – is for us to know that we are loved and accepted for who and what we are at this very moment.

Each one of us is known through and through, loved with God's unconditional love – right now... just as we are.

The child in the crib looks to us with outstretched arms tonight in a way which calls upon us to welcome Him and hold Him close to our hearts and, at the same time, welcomes us into His embrace to comfort and console us. The simple, open, welcoming attitude of the infant Jesus is the perfect revelation of God's heart: a heart filled with humble, gentle love.

In the babe in the manger God made Himself small so that we could understand Him, welcome Him and love Him.

The child of Bethlehem, who is the incarnation of our God, humbly opens His arms and reaches out to us asking us take Him to heart, to welcome His coming into the world anew tonight. He wants to commune with us and for us to commune with Him in this Eucharist; Christ's desire is to see us enter spontaneously into His feelings, His thoughts and His will; to become one with Him who has become one with us.

The seemingly defenceless, weak, vulnerable, poor infant of Bethlehem is none other than the great leader of God's People who has for mission to establish a reign of peace on earth by conquering the forces of darkness, violence and hatred.

The little child we contemplate tonight has inaugurated what Pope Francis has called the gentle *revolution of tenderness*. Let me quote from Pope Francis' Angelus address of January 2014: *Christ reveals the love of God from humility. From that flows the hope that in our poverty we know we are loved, we are visited, accompanied by God.*

You and I can be marked by difficulties and weaknesses. What we celebrate this night tells us that God who knows us through and through, is with us as we are, where we are on our life journey.

The nearness of God to humanity is the great gift of Christmas. God is near to us. His proximity is a gift of love that never fails, never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

May *God-with-us* be the gift we take away from this midnight Eucharist... *God-with-us* even in the heart of the nights of our existence.