

Christmas Day
(Isaiah 52:7-10 / John 1:1-18)
25.12.2020

For St John the Christmas story is set in the context of a new beginning. It is hard not to think of the first creation story when we read the opening line of the Prologue of John's Gospel: *In principio... In the beginning... In the beginning was the Word*. In the Genesis creation account the Word is that by which all that is came into being. God spoke and all that is was made. No doubt inspired by this connection, St Gregory of Nyssa called the Christmas feast *The Festival of Re-Creation*. It is in that spirit that I suggest we try to celebrate the Solemnity of the Incarnation this year. God knows, I am sure, that we all hope for a fresh start, a new beginning, a better future at this time. Just the day before yesterday, standing in a queue to pay for a parking ticket in a Shopping Centre in Newry, I overheard two men expressing the hope that Christmas would mark a turning point and we would soon begin enjoy the dawn of a new beginning for our world.

If the Prologue of John's Gospel introduces *the Word* in its very first line, at the core of this first page of John's Gospel is the affirmation that *the Word took on human flesh and chose to live among us*. The real point of this long poetic passage is to be found in that little line. The Word having taken on human flesh brings us to the heart of what Christmas (our celebration of the Solemnity of the Incarnation) is all about. Put simply, we could say, that with Christmas we are led to celebrate the wondrous mystery of the divinity revealed in humanity. The *Word made flesh* is God. He is the divine who became one with us in our humanity. By the same token, our humanity has been divinised. With Jesus God became human to open up for us the way whereby we came to share in His very own divine life. In Christ Jesus, it is as if God reaffirms humanity's goodness and gives us all a fresh start, a new beginning. It is for this reason that Christian tradition, stemming back to the time of the Apostle Paul, refers to Jesus as *the New Adam*.

With the Christmas mystery (the Incarnation) humanity's communion with God, which Adam and Eve forfeited, is restored. We are made one with our Creator God from whom our first parents separated themselves by their disobedience.

On this day we are called to *listen* to the Word made flesh – remembering that *to listen to the Word* really means *to give obedience to the Word*. We are called to hear and to welcome the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This amounts to hearing the Lord speak into the secret of each one of our hearts as He says to us: *You. My beloved, are called to be one with Me... Called to live in Me... Yes, well and truly live! To live in communion with Me... allowing Me to be fully alive in you and allowing yourself to really live in Me, as the Father lives in Me and I live in the Father*. (You will hear in what I have just said there echoes of phrases found later on in Jesus' discourses in John's Good News account – phrases reminiscent of Johannine language encountered throughout the Fourth Gospel.)

If Christmas is our celebration of God's having taken on our human flesh, it is above all God's celebration of humanity – our humanity!
In the words of one Episcopalian writer: *This festival of re-creation is about God entrusting Himself to human beings, to you and to me. It is God's reaffirmation of humanity's goodness. It is the exchanging of life between God and you and me*. What this American Anglican writer states gives meaning to – or rather is clearly rooted in – that adage of the early Christian Church: *God became human, so that humanity might become God*.

In his Epistles the Apostle John echoes what He already makes clear in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel when he speaks of all those who *welcome the Word becoming children of God*. What the Johannine epistles teach us amounts to this: through the *Son of God* having become the *Son of Man* all men and women who dare to live their lives in Him are led to see themselves for who and what they truly are: children of God.

We will hear the Letters of John throughout the Christmas days reminding us of the dignity and the responsibility that is ours as members of the family of God. I think of this line among many others: *By this they are seen to be children of God, by living in the light as He lives in the light*.

Christianity affirms strongly the reality of the full humanity of Christ. In Christ-Jesus the Divine became well and truly man. Jesus did not just put on an external human appearance, He experienced fully the human condition. (Paul also insists on this in his famous Christological hymn in Philippians 2.) We could say that Jesus took *our lot* upon Himself, so that we might, as the Apostle puts it, *put on Christ...* in other words, so that we might be clothed in divinity.

To say that we are Christian – measuring that this really means that *we are in Christ...* indeed, that *we are Christ* – changes the way we understand, see and appreciate ourselves. To consider that others are also Christ completely changes the way we regard them.

What I have just said there is quite challenging when we think of it. If we take seriously the affirmation that *we are Christ* – and that others are also Christ – we are led to understand the word *Christmas* in another way than we are used to. What we are led to understand is that the word *Christmas* is not just a noun, but also a verb. This thought came to me last year (or maybe it was two years ago) when a brother came to me and questioned a turn of phrase someone had used in a Christmas greeting they had addressed to us. The brother was intrigued that this greeting chose to use the word *Christmas* as a verb, conveying the hope that *Jesus might Christmas in us*. I must say that I personally understood alongside that wish another desire formulate itself within my heart. It was the desire that we ourselves might also *Christmas*: *Christmas with and in Jesus*. For me, that amounts to wishing that Christ *the Word made flesh* be recognised as having entered into our lives and having transformed them, so that each one of us may come to see ourself and others around us as persons inhabited by the Lord Himself; as men and women *made in God's own image and likeness* as this resemblance was uniquely reflected by the person of the man Jesus. In other words, that our way of being would strive to be conformed to that of Christ.

It may strange to some that on Christmas day I should turn to an insight from rabbinical teaching to illustrate what the mystery of Christmas should awaken within us, but I make no apologies for doing so, because it seems to me that the Jewish tradition upon which I will draw now gives voice to an insight which helps us appreciate what Christianity claims when it states that we are all of us an *alter Christus, another Christ*. There is a rabbinical tradition which makes the claim that each person has an invisible procession of angels which precedes him or her and this invisible army cries out – albeit with voices that our hearing ears alone cannot capture, but which the ear of the heart can and should be attentive to: *Make way for the image of God*.

In Christian terms that could be understood as meaning just this: *See Christ in every person who comes your way*.

The great truth of Christmas is that God is all around us. He is in our neighbours certainly, those living next door, those we love and care for, those we hold dear. But He is also in those

we count to be strangers, those we hold at a distance, those we fear, and even in those we might be inclined to shun.

The former Chief Rabbi in Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks made an important remark which I believe is also very important for us Christians to take on board. He remarked that he used to think that the most important biblical commandment for us to hear for life in this world was *Love thy neighbour as thyself*, but then one day he noted that in the Scriptures thirty-six times we are asked to *love the stranger*. That discovery helped him to better understand and widen the sense of the commandment to love one's neighbour. It is so important for us to grasp as Jonathan Sacks did that our neighbour is everyone... including all those people we do not know and all those people we struggle with.

May no one feel so alone today that they are led to conclude that they do not have a neighbour.

Saying that, comes to mind something I learned after the death of a dear friend of our community who died to Covid19 on the 3rd of November, 2020. During all her last days, indeed throughout her hospitalisation, her family did not have access to her. What I esteem to be extraordinary is a note found among her belongings when her family went to fetch her affairs at the hospital after her death. This note was written by a fellow patient on the back of a hospital menu. It spoke of how our friend Gemma, who we might think of as having died alone, had evidently become a friend and neighbour to all those around her in the respiratory ward where she lay before being moved into the ICU where she passed away. According to the note written by that fellow patient, in her final days, our friend had managed to cheer the spirits of the other patients and the staff who cared for her by the way she interacted with them. To Gemma no one was a stranger. All were neighbours. Because of this, I am sure she reflected Christ to those who encountered her. I can affirm this all the more given the fact that it was evident for me from my reading of the text messages she sent to me from that respiratory ward that she was living in close communion with the Lord Jesus and that He was alive in her heart. Her communion with Christ led her to be in communion with all who are *in Christ...* and, over and beyond men and women who are explicitly Christian, in communion with every human person (Christian or not) who is *made in God's own image and likeness*.

Our world desperately needs to hear what the rabbis tell us the angels say to us when someone walks through this world: *Make way for God*.

We need to hear and take that message to heart in regard to others... and also in regard to ourselves. *The Lord is with us*. He lives in everyone. In this assurance is the real blessing of Christmas.

Amen!