

4th Sunday Advent (C)

- In Rome, not far from the Colosseum is a basilica dedicated to St. Clement, a pope of Rome at the turn of the 1st to the 2nd centuries.
- It is a beautiful building built in layers like a cake.
- Slightly below street level is the main basilica, dating from 1108.
- Beneath this, & down a steep set of steps is a church so old that it is mentioned in writings in the 4th century & was the place for some of the pope's councils in the 5th century. You can still visit it today.
- Its apse is in turn constructed above a 3rd century temple of Mithras, which you can also visit, & below that temple are the remains of a Roman house dating back to about the time of Christ.
- St Clement's is a parable of Christmas in stone – our experience of Christmas is in layers.
- The top layer is the consumer Christmas the Christmas of shopping centres & the Greensborough plaza from which there is no escape these days - insistent Christmas carols, reindeer & Santa Claus, & the aggressive merchandising of all kinds of goods; it encourages acquisitiveness among children, & creates anxiety about overspending & fatigue among adults.
- In itself alone it has a tendency of being a Christmas that can be a bit hollow & superficial.
- The second layer is Christmas with a touch of Charles Dickens.
- It is unashamedly middle-class - cards depicting snowy scenes, roaring fires, turkey, ham, plum pudding, mince pies.
- It is the Christmas of the family get-together, of goodwill to all people, of philanthropy & expansiveness & an exposure & ridiculing of the Scrooge.
- These values have a lot to be said for them.
- Most people have a shot at this version of Christmas, but in the absence of faith, it can be a benevolent humanism that has the danger of being short-lived - & then everything goes on as before.
- The third level is that of the crib, which depicts what Christmas is about.
- Most people are surprised to discover that St Francis of Assisi invented the Christmas crib in the 13th century as a way of teaching about Jesus' birth.
- This is the layer of the school Nativity play, which re-enacts the Christmas story, & which for all its simplicity can be deeply moving.
- The fourth & deepest layer is the spiritual one.
- It is the story of how in Israel 2000 years ago a girl gave birth to a baby boy, & at that moment, & in this child, God came to physically inhabit his own creation. The infinite penetrated the finite.
- On the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, Michelangelo depicts God the Father leaning down out of heaven & with his index finger touching that of Adam – it is meant to portray the transmission of life.
- At Bethlehem, God does not touch us with his index finger, God immerses his whole self & floods our human nature with his presence.

- God comes with great compassion because humanity, his great love, his brainchild, the apple of his eye, made in his image & likeness, has got itself into an insoluble tangle of deteriorating relationships between people.
- The only way of unravelling the tangle is from the inside.
- In the person of this baby God's Son took our nature upon himself & entered our world in weakness & in love - He came to remind us that we – all of us - are God's children & that we have an eternal destiny.
- God responds to one of the deepest longings of the human spirit, the longing to be rescued, saved, comforted, healed, restored, vindicated because (& the vulnerable child within all of us still cries out) "I can't do it by myself".
- We could rely on him much more than we're prone to do – that requires humility.
- We can have a tendency to dismiss, or even condemn, the first three layers, & to see the spiritual layer as the only true one.
- This is based on the supposition that the spiritual & the material are opposed to one another, but this is not so. Christianity includes matter & spirit.
- There can be no such thing as a purely spiritual Christmas.
- What we have to do is find a connection between the secular market-place & the spiritual content of the feast.
- Much of the buying & selling that occurs at Christmas fosters gift-giving, good works, joy, & peace, & the affirmation of family ties - resulting in giving & receiving.
- This approach helps us to see the close relationship between the spiritual & the material, between heavenly & earthly things.
- We need to learn how to integrate the two.
- The core religious problem is: how to reconcile the spiritual & material, flesh & spirit, the inward & the outward, the surface & the substance.
- There are those who insist on a clear division between the divine & the human, the sacred & the secular, the soul & the body.
- But we won't find that in Christmas & here God is at fault because the whole point of Christmas is that the God who is spiritual becomes physically present – becomes flesh – incarnate.
- By this action God does not spiritualize everything, but rather, emphasises the sacredness of everything & the possibility of allowing him to come into our lives, relationships & our ordinary worldly affairs & encounter him there.
- This week our focus is on our being blessed by God — we are, because of Christmas, blessed individually & as a human race.
- May we see more deeply through the layers of Christmas through the commercial & mundane & encounter Christ.
- The joy expressed by Elizabeth & her child in today's Gospel reflects the joy of all people of faith as we draw so close to the celebration of Christmas & the greatest expression of God's love – to enter into the world as one just like us & share our experience that he may give it greater significance for us.