

Christmas 2020

- What a year of change it has been! Who would have thought just a year ago when we gathered for Christmas in 2019 that we would have to restrict numbers coming to Mass, that you had to book-in, that some may have to be turned away – I can't help but think of the analogy of Joseph & Mary being turned away from lodgings for the birth of their baby.
- It has been a year of crisis which has resulted in the premature deaths of many in the world; of grief in the loss of loved ones who may not have had the comfort of being with those who loved them; of anxiety over the possibility of getting sick with COVID; of industries going into bankruptcy; of people losing their jobs & income; of the explosion of global poverty.
- Our categories & ways of thinking have been shaken up; priorities & lifestyles have been challenged.
- We can resist change often, but what we have been going through, has forced us to change.
- The question at this time is how we are going to come through this crisis – in what ways are we going to change.
- One thing is for sure, when we come through this, you, I, & all the world is going to be changed, we will not be the same; the question is – do we come out better or worse - & the choice is up to us.
- Crisis exposes our hearts & reveals what is truly deep within us, & so it brings out the best & worst of human behaviours – from the self-sacrificing men & women, doctors, nurses & carers who spent themselves in the service of those in need, to those, who like vultures are profiting from people's financial vulnerability. The state of our hearts & priorities are exposed.
- Maybe at the end of this year of the COVID pandemic we can examine ourselves as to what this time has exposed to us about ourselves – both the good & the bad, the things we can be pleased with & those we may feel ashamed of, & determine what is it about ourselves, our virtues, characteristics, behaviours & priorities, that we can choose to take into the future as changes we want to implement in our lives.
- I have often wondered why God became a human person in what we refer to as the Holy Land, because by all accounts, it is anything but holy, & 2000 years ago on the edge of a huge Western empire – a hotbed of instability & revolt. And I think that's the point – God immerses himself into the mess of human affairs – then, & ever since.
- But God changes things, he enables us to do things we have not thought of before.
- Since that Christmas of over 2000 years ago something quite radical has happened - the world has been changed forever, the world is no longer just the creation of God, but the place where he gets his hands dirty living the human life, not just 2000 years ago as Jesus of Nazareth, but continually among us & within us in the beauty & the messiness of our lives.

- So much has happened that might never have happened had it not been for that birth in Bethlehem.
- We might consider how central was the Christian faith in overturning totalitarians from ancient Rome to modern communism, in the abolition of slavery & apartheid, in building a culture of human rights & fundamental values; or the role of the Church in the invention of universities, the search for truth in science & philosophy, the promotion of beauty in liturgy, art, architecture & music.
- Or that the oldest & largest healthcare provider in the world is the Catholic Church & that its network of orphanages, schools & welfare institutions is unparalleled.
- So much happened since that Boy was born that is indeed 'joy to the world' as the prophets promised & angels sang on the first Christmas night.
- However, not everything is rosy in the Christian story.
- The late Christopher Hitchens loved to highlight shameful things such as crusades, inquisitions, persecutions, abuse; the failure of Christians in World War II, in Ireland, the Balkans or Rwanda.
- Many of his criticisms were historically anachronistic; they ignored the context, the ways, for instance, that religion has been misused in political or racial conflicts or the different standards of different ages.
- Nonetheless it is true that many Christians, from the mighty to the lowly, have acted out of prejudice or greed rather than piety or compassion.
- There has been colonisation, violence, abuse.
- Instead of that peace & good will of which angels sang at the first Christmas, many have experienced the coming of Christians as the dawn of war, violence, prejudice & ill-will - For this we must repent, apologise, try to be better in future & for this we need Christmas again to remind us of the powerful force for good we are called to be.
- Christ brought a message & was the message & inspiration to live more humanely.
- At Christmas God comes to take possession of our hearts, if we are open to it, just as in the first Christmas he came & took possession of the world to transform it & set people free to be who God calls them to be.
- And now he says to us what he already said to the world through the birth of Jesus - I am with you. I am the hope for change.
- Christ has changed the world with his presence & can continue to do that through us.
- We are living in challenging times, as all times are in varying ways & degrees.
- The power & presence of Jesus is as necessary today as it ever has been.
- To be given access to this power is a remarkable sign of God's love for us.
- This Christmas, let us reflect on this gift of God, that knowing our personal need to be strengthened & changed, he entered human history as a baby out of love for you & me to give us the capacity to be more than we are.
- In turn, may we be able to be agents of change in our own time.

- There is still much for Christ & His Church to do.
- There are still places, hearts, lives in need of light.
- Let us offer our hearts as a crib for this Christ-child; offer our voices, minds & hands for His mission in our world.
- May God bless each of you & your families on this Christmas day & every day of your lives as we hopefully progress towards a post-COVID time.