

## Homily at Mass The Nativity of the Lord Year C – 25 December 2018

Look up in the sky! It's not a drone disrupting air traffic at Gatwick airport in London! But angels, whole choirs of them, singing, proclaiming, announcing joyful news to poor shepherds and all of us: today is born our Saviour, Christ the Lord! Looking down on the earth with them, what do we see? We see a small town just a stone's throw from Jerusalem, the town of Bethlehem. Bethlehem means "House of Bread" – the men and women of Bethlehem started each day early, baking bread to be transported to Jerusalem. It seems right, doesn't it, that the one whom you and I receive with faith and love in the Eucharist, whom we honour as the Bread of Life and the Living Bread come down from Heaven, should be born this day in the City of Bread and placed in a manger, a food trough, to satisfy our hunger for a Saviour, a just king and lord, a divine friend who remains ever faithful, God – with – us.

With the angels gaze down on this small town and we see – as Mary and Joseph discovered – the town is full to bursting, the whole world seems to have rushed to this out of the way place to find shelter and to be counted in the census of the whole world, decreed by the Roman Emperor. In Bethlehem, tonight/today every room is taken, every hotel is full. There is no room at the Inn for this little itinerant family from Nazareth – Mary full term and ready to give birth and her weary, troubled, yet faithful and loving husband Joseph. The only place left for them is a barn, a stable, a cave: and so like our prehistoric ancestors Mary's son – God's only Son – is born in a cave. It's as if human history has started all over again.

While the inhabitants of Bethlehem – the bakers, their wives and children as well as all the rest who have squeezed with this small town are indoors, perhaps eating, talking or already tucked into bed, the angels look down to see if anyone is still around, still outdoors. They spy shepherds and their small flocks, perhaps warming themselves at campfires, wrapped up in sheep's wool coats, some of them talking, sharing a story, a song or a joke, while some are trying to get a bit of sleep, perhaps lying up against a tree or blocking a gate in a wooden stall, to keep the sheep in and the wolves out. It is to these men that the choirs of angels appear – how many? Tens? hundreds? They appear radiant, glorious, shining in light brighter than the full moon and the nearest stars. Their song is joyous, more splendid than any human choir. Their news is breathtaking, momentous, earth shattering: "Today in the city of David a saviour is born – he is Christ the Lord!"

The song of the angels is familiar to all of us – it is a song, a hymn we sing at Mass every Sunday, a song that bursts from us with extra special joy on Christmas Day. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to all people of good will." From Heaven, the angels see us gathered in our churches big and small, grand and humble, in every country of the world this night/day. We join their song and shout aloud our praise and joy, our hearts are lifted up in thanksgiving, our lives feel new and different because God is with us – we live life not just relying on our own wits or efforts, but with God's friendship revealed in his Son, born in our human flesh.

"Glory to God in the highest" the angels sing tonight/today. The great English poet and writer G K Chesterton was a master of paradox – he had a knack of seeing things almost in reverse. A poem he wrote one Christmas is called "Gloria in Profundis" – glory to God in the lowest. The poem speaks of God whom Heaven could not contain, for whom eternity is too limited. This is God who finds a home on earth, with us. He chooses not to remain in the lofty heights of Heaven – at a distance, far away, beyond our sight and out of reach. He chooses to step on to earth but not in disguise or as a phantom. He chooses to come down to us, with all our human needs, our human and social messiness, our pig-headedness, and our pride. He chooses to be born in a human family, to experience childhood, adolescence, adult life; hunger, homelessness as a refugee and a wandering preacher; the joy of friendship and the sting of rejection, and a criminal's death. Glory to God in the highest because God reveals his glory, his love, his mercy in his new born Son. Glory to God in the lowest because God's Son is our brother, our Lord, our Saviour, our friend, born in our flesh, for us, with us this day!