

Christmas Eve 2016

Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and they shall call his name Immanuel which means God with us.

Matthew chapter 1 verse 23.

And so we come to another Christmas eve and, as ever at this time we reflect on the past year on all that has happened in our own lives, the lives of those related to us and around us and the life of the world. As we contemplate and reflect on all that has happened and all that continues to take place we realise that, like a river, life is a constant flow which we can neither stop nor step away from. There is a constant flow of activity of life and death and life, - constantly flowing. When we look at our own lives and personal relationships we realise that no year is the same. We are another year older, people leave our presence, some emigrate to another country, while others whom we love have died.

In the life of the world terror continues to inflict the Human race, in Aleppo, Mosul, Gaza, Palestine and more recently Germany and Switzerland. We see images of people dying, of people in terrible distress. We are all too familiar with those who continue to cross the perilous seas of the Mediterranean in search of lives of security free from tyranny, free from terror, free from poverty and so many other things.

We realise that we cannot stop the incessant flow of life. We step into the stream and are immersed in it. Sometimes we are overcome by it. Occasions when we see little children terrorised, injured and homeless bring us to tears of despair and solidarity of pain. At this time we search for meaning. We ask what is the purpose of life and what is its deep meaning?

As we reflect on the world and our own place in it we realise that we carry the imprint of all that has happened before us. Psychology tells us that the person I am today is the history of the experiences I have had since birth and even before. The body I am has been shaped by life experiences that have flowed throughout my ancestry. The experiences we have had in our own lives and in the lives of those who have gone before us imprints in our DNA, in our very essence. It is that which makes us individuals.

When we apply this to the macrocosm of the world we come to an understanding of what collective consciousness is. The world we live in today, its very essence, carries the scars of history in its deep core. When we reflect even on the past one hundred years we can identify the deep trauma that has scarred humanity and continues to affect our psychic and wellbeing. We are not spectators of history but participants. The world we live in today is a consequence of everything that has evolved in it thus far. We cannot relegate history to the confines of reminiscence but need to acknowledge its effect on our present living. We carry in our living psyche the effects of two world wars, the horror of Holocaust and the plague of despotism. Until we recognise that history has a direct impact on our present living we will continue to repeat what has gone before.

In all this we need to be reminded of what we are about tonight. We are here because we are people of hope. The hope that assures that God's divine plan is constantly at work in the world and that each one of us is part of that plan. Thomas Keating, a modern day mystic says:

The modern world lies under a pervasive sense of anguish, of being abandoned, or at least experiencing God as absent. Yet events that seem to turn our lives upside down and inside out are part of God's redemptive plan, not only for us, but for the world in which we live. God may be preparing a great awakening for the world, if God can find enough people to cooperate in this mysterious plan.

When we come to celebrate the Christmas story we are called to reflect on its meaning in the context of today's world. It calls us to reflect on the presence of God in the world and his presence in the midst of living humanity. John 1.14 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. But when we reflect on so much that is and has happened in the world, so much death, so much trauma, so much pain we ask where is God in all this.

Tonight we celebrate the great birth of the incarnate Son of God in Jesus the Christ. St Luke and Matthew paint a lovely story of the birth which gives us warm feelings and which is recounted in so many nativity plays by children who are affected by its simplicity and beauty.

Too often we Christians leave Christ in the crib and don't journey with him beyond Bethlehem to the full significance of what Christ coming into the world means for all humanity. Let us reflect on that for a while. Jesus is born into a perilous life. Joseph and Mary journey from the safety of their home in Nazareth to a town one hundred miles away in Bethlehem to be counted in a census imposed by a foreign power. In Bethlehem Mary gives birth not in the comfort of a warm room but in the outside stable on the outskirts of the town. Even at his birth there is a price on his head. The very beginnings of incarnation happen on the outside, on the perimeters of life, right on the margins. The revelation of incarnation does not come to great kings or rulers but to the poorest of the poor.

And then we need to move on from Bethlehem. When we travel with Jesus on to Egypt and from there to Nazareth we realise that his life is not an easy one neither is it a safe one. As He began his life on the margins he continued to be the outsider and it was from this position that he could speak the truth in boldness challenging our collective consciousness.

Then Jesus enters his ministry journeying from Nazareth towards Jerusalem. On the way he continues to be the outsider, the challenger of the status quo. Challenging people to deepen their understanding of God and his presence in the world. His mission was to open God to all who would receive him. Who are the people who receive him? They are the outcasts, those on the margin, the poor, the lepers, those who are rejected by society because of their illness, sickness or disease. Those in broken relationships, those who live dysfunctional lives. He meets them in their vulnerability and redeems them by his love.

So when we come at this time to reflect on God's presence in the world, we realise that God is very present everywhere. He is not confined to our churches or great cathedrals, or to those who pledge a faith allegiance. God is in the world, God, the Immanuel suffers alongside the people of Aleppo, in the children who suffer, in the hospitals, in the homes of people who are starving. God is in the very essence of the lives of people and in the life of the world. God is in the world. HE is not absent, confined or boxed in by religion. He is everywhere.

Christianity calls us to live the life of Jesus in our own lives. To live fully embracing humanity in its rich diversity. To live as Jesus and to live fully and to live lives of truth is to embrace unconditional love in our relationship with others and with the world. Richard Rohr says: *As you look back on a year almost ended, recall the ways in which God has been inviting you to return, again and again, to Love which is the same as returning to God* Christianity is calling us to be the outsider, to challenge the status quo, to go to places and encounter people who are part of our own existence, our fellow human beings with whom we have a deep connection. We realise that we are not separate, we are not distinct from those who suffer. We are part and parcel, very much brothers and sisters in their suffering. When people suffer it affects us, we cannot be removed from it. When I give something to someone in need I am also ministering to myself. When I reach out to God in the other, I am reaching out to the God in me. There is that relationship of God in us, Immanuel born in us.

If we are called to do anything tonight at this celebration of the Eucharist, the celebration of the incarnation of Christ, we are called to recognise God in the world. To acknowledge God's presence to us and to be outsiders reaching out to all situations in the world with hope and confidence not as people who are separate but as brothers and sisters sharing a common humanity and a common indwelling of God in us. It is only by embracing this that we become a powerful force of good in the face of evil in the world. John chapter 1 and the 12th verse, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. Amen.