**Christmas Eve 24 December 2023**

It is always a privilege to be able to stand here and preach. Not everyone is enabled to share their thoughts and reflections on the gospel of the day and how it relates to what is happening in the world around us. It is an enormous responsibility to be prophetic in those reflections seeking not necessarily to make listeners comfortable but to challenge the status quo and to question what is going on around us and what is given to us as norms.

I could easily give you a beautiful and sweet sermon about the nativity that will bring warmth to your hearts and send you home feeling a joyful glow but that is not where I am right now and to do so would be a divorce from reality on my part. It is not that I want to be a Christmas Grinch putting a damper on our celebrations nor do I want to be a killjoy. What I do want is to explore the Gospel story of the nativity through the lens of what is happening in the Land of the Holy one right now!

It cannot escape us that as Christians are celebrating the incarnation of Christ, the only Son of God into the world in the form of an infant in a manger in Bethlehem, numbered among those Christians are families in Gaza and Bethlehem who are gathered in ruined churches and makeshift huts, fearful of their lives, seeking some seeds of hope in a place of fear and despair.

We have dressed up the nativity story in terms of it being a nice story rather than a significant metaphor of how God brings salvation to the world through becoming a vulnerable and excluded human being. Jesus and Mary are two migrants travelling some one hundred miles by donkey and on foot. Mary is pregnant and risks being ostracised but saved by Joseph’s compassionate decision to marry her. They are excluded from the inn and are renegaded to the barn. The Christ child is born into this vulnerable and fearful scene.

His first visitors are outcast shepherds and astrologers from the East. Not long after being Born, Jesus is bundled up and carried off to safety in Egypt whilst the megalomaniac Herod, seeking revenge for not being told where the Christ would be born and for being duped by the men from the East, sets about slaughtering all the first born males in his kingdom.

Justine McCarthy, in her article in the Irish Times of the 15 December puts all this into contrast with what is happening in Gaza today. I would like to echo her words when she states: ‘ Around Ireland and across the world these days, schoolchildren are enacting the nativity as the greatest story of human redemption ever told. Many of the performances skip over St Matthew’s Gospel account of the massacre of the innocents because it is too bleak to contemplate in this season of good cheer. For Palestinians there is no dodging it.

They are living the reality of the slaughter of the innocents in reality and dying from it, while the rest of us are preoccupied for shopping for baubles.

Seeing this played out on our television screens and reading it in the newspapers tends to have a numbing effect on our psychics. The reality is so hard to bear that we have to block it out and distract ourselves with trivia. It is when we wake up in the middle of the night and are confronted with the sheer horror of the situation, the gross injustice of a revenge that seeks to wipe out a whole people that we too are fearful and uneasy with what is happening.

We ask the question: ‘what makes it so easy to demonise another race of people or even another person, so much so that it enables us to see them as less than ourselves and fodder for annihilation without conscience.

The people of Gaza for years have been isolated, dominated, dehumanised and ghettoised allowing a brutal regime to justify its acts of slaughter of over 18000 women and children. The term collateral damage is an excuse to obliterate a race. Even the term war is used to describe a mighty regime using all its power to obliterate a people. The London Daily Telegraph reported on Monday how whole family trees have been dismembered and whole branches obliterated since the massive onslaught against Palestinian people began. BUT we are not allowed to say anything.

We are told to sing dumb. If we do speak against such atrocities then we are labelled anti Semetic. We are told that this so called war is justified because of the atrocity of what happened on the 7th October. I am no excusing any form of violent action like what happened on 7th October but I do need to comment on how a nation has reduced itself to the level of terrorism to achieve its aims.

But what does our silence do? What does our lack of action do? Silence is acquiescence with what is happening. It is this silent acquiescence that is allowing the far right movement spread across the world. A movement that seeks to exclude and dominate and speaks in a language of hate. We have experienced a taste of this on our streets not that long ago AND with the burning of a hotel in the west of Ireland, a hotel earmarked for the housing of refugees and asylum seekers. You may ask: But what can I do? I am totally helpless in the face of so much injustice, prejudice and hate.

First of all we need to look at ourselves and how, in our daily living, it comes easy for us to exclude and even demonise those whom we deem lower than us or not deserving of our time. We all share a common humanity but too often we define ourselves in terms of contrast to others, be it their social background, the colour of their skin, the country of their birth or their sexual orientation.

Admitting our own prejudices is the first step in enabling us to speak the truth boldly. And never was it more important to speak that truth than in the current world vacuum where social media is allowed to run riot, where the strongest countries with vested interests are vetoing moves for a ceasefire in a conflict that worsens by the day, where the welcome of the stranger among us is running bare.

But even that is not enough. We need to feel the pain and anguish of those who are suffering in Gaza. The anguish and devastation of parents losing their child, the bewilderment of children orphaned by a bomb attack the starvation of those who have no food. To be a true Christian is to be as the Christ. In Christ God enters humanity to take on the human condition, to be with those in their anguish, to include when others exclude. To touch the untouchables and to heal through encounter.

May Christ, the Immanuel be born in each one of us tonight. May we be emboldened to live the gospel call to Love our neighbour as ourselves. Do we dare to ask who is my neighbour??? Amen.