

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT 2009

‘Glory to God on high and peace to all people on earth!’

This is my Christmas greeting to you and to all sharing in the Mass on television.

A Happy Christmas!

Yes, indeed, we are filled at this moment with peace and happiness, enhanced by the beauty of this liturgy and by memories of goodness.

But will it last? Realistically we know that happiness and peace are difficult to sustain beyond such moments as this. More often we feel pressurised, discontented or troubled. Perhaps sustaining happiness in our lives is an art we have lost.

Yet this is our Christmas greeting: that the child born in a stable in Bethlehem is the source of our happiness.

What a paradox!

The wisdom of our world tells us that happiness comes with success or pre-eminence in our chosen field, with wealth whether through enterprise or the Lottery, or with celebrity status, even the fleeting

status of TV fame. Happiness, we are told, comes from the way in which we are regarded by society.

Yet, in our hearts, we know this is not so, even while being tempted to follow such siren voices. We know that our happiness lies much closer to home: in our steady relationships of friendship and love: in family and community.

Taking this path leads us to a much firmer grasp of true happiness. Slowly we learn what our priorities must be if our desire for happiness is to be fulfilled. And the crib, the stable of Bethlehem, spells out those lessons with the clarity of a star shining in the cold night air.

Let us look and see.

Here is a truly human family: Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus. Here is a loving, committed couple, sharing side by side both adversity and joy. This is the first source of happiness: faithful, persevering love which bears its fruit through self-sacrifice.

Then there is the child. He is at the heart of this revelation, at the heart of happiness, for in his every word and action he will disclose the truth, not only of God but also of our own humanity. He is the one at the centre of these celebrations, whose birth we celebrate and whose message we again proclaim.

But there is something to be understood about this child which alone unlocks the door to our true happiness. It is this. He is, in his person, both truly God and truly man. This is the key. Without a firm grasp of this truth we will lose this greatest of all gifts, we will misunderstand the real significance of his message.

If Jesus is indeed God yet not fully man, but simply God in disguise, then his message of God's loving forgiveness is charming indeed but still out of our reach. If he is not truly human, it does not find a home in our flesh.

If Jesus is indeed truly one of us, truly man, but not true God, then his message of peace and forgiveness may well be humanly inspiring but it lacks the power to change us. For only God can do that.

Only when we grasp that Jesus is truly God and truly man is the gulf between us and God breeched. Then we are no longer on our own.

This is why the heavens rejoiced and the angels sang at his birth! This child is totally unique and his coming a transforming moment. This is God with us, God in our flesh and his message is both true and full of power. It is for us and it can truly change our lives.

This child Jesus must grow. So, too, must his message, within us and in our world. Each of us is called to grow and mature from an infancy of faith into a mature willingness – like Mary’s – to be instruments not of our own ambition, but of God’s will.

This is our struggle, for while we long for peace, there is still conflict within our hearts and our world. Conflicts fill the news, and cause injury and death, to those in Afghanistan and Iraq who are so much in our prayers at this time. While we long for sincerity, there is deceit and duplicity within us and in our society. While we long for a sense of community, so many youngsters resort to gangs and gang violence to bolster their weakened sense of identity. While we long for reconciliation there is still such bitterness in our blood-stream.

But the gift is there: the gift of Christ’s love and forgiveness, to be received on our knees. Then we may grow again.

And in that growth lies our true happiness:
A happiness of sincerely serving others;
A happiness of rejoicing with them in shared effort and joy;
A happiness of knowing and offering forgiveness;
A happiness of lasting love which is not afraid of self-sacrifice.

This is the happiness open for us on this darkest of nights. Let us rejoice in this gift, accepting it afresh with gratitude and so wish each other a very happy Christmas indeed.