

MIDNIGHT MASS; Westminster Cathedral; 2010.

The events we joyfully celebrate this evening form a story which has been told and retold over 2000 years. The telling of it has called upon art and poetry, music and drama to catch its beauty and express its meaning. Some attempts are more successful than others: they stand the test of time. So we thank our splendid choir for giving us some of the best musical retelling of this Christmas story. And we love our carols, too.

We are grateful to the BBC. We were so pleased to receive Pope Benedict's Christmas Message for us all on Radio 4 this morning. I also thank the BBC for the retelling of the Christmas story it commissioned and broadcast over the last four days. I was moved by the beauty and drama of 'The Nativity'.

There was one point at which this narrative departed from the Gospel accounts. When Joseph heard the message of the angel that he was 'to take Mary home as his wife', he did not do so. In the televised story Joseph's struggle to believe Mary that her baby was of God, was central to the drama. It had to be carried through to the end.

This reflects a tendency in our society to present faith simply as a problem. Some cast belief in God as marginal and not a serious factor in how life is to be shaped. Today is a moment to challenge those assumptions.

At the end of the filmed 'Nativity', the hot-headed shepherd, Thomas, who struggles with the expectations of his faith, bends to kiss the child's tiny foot. The Wise men, who travel a thousand miles, bow in worship, exclaiming him to be 'The Lamb of God come to take away the sins of the world.' And Joseph comes to believe that Mary's son is indeed Son of God, born in a truly virgin birth.

On this night there will be many sharing this struggle for faith, which is always a gift of God. May they, too, accept the outstretched hand of God coming to us in the child, close to us in our vulnerability. Faith in God appeals, even today.

We say this in the marvellous scenes of the Apostolic Visit of Pope Benedict in September. They suggested that faith in God is like an underground stream. Largely invisible, the stream nurtures so much fertile growth on a rocky landscape, but only every now and then, bursts out in a glorious and reassuring sight. The Pope's Visit strengthened our faith and restored so much of our confidence. Indeed, faith in God is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be discovered afresh, and a gift which serves the deepest good of our society.

There are other strong indications supporting this conviction. Opinion polls conducted both before and after the Holy Father's Visit, indicated clear trends in public opinion. After the Visit, there were more people insisting that the spiritual dimension of their lives is really important. There were far more people saying that they wanted to give more time to their family and close relationships, and a significant majority agreeing with the message of the Holy Father that aggressive secularism is to be resisted as it minimises values crucial for our well-being.

This holy night brings a renewing light into our world, the light of revelation. Revelation is God showing to us fundamental truths which we cannot attain on our own. These are truths about our deepest human nature and about the nature of God. Some find the idea of revelation abhorrent, for they insist that we can hold to be true only those matters we can demonstrate by observable facts and scientific investigation. Yet love and beauty can't be proved in this way. But the love and beauty around us still move us and claim our commitment. Often it is precisely through such love and beauty, supported by reason, that we are drawn to recognise the presence of God and the yearning, the longing, He has planted within us. This is the pathway of Revelation.

On this night, in great love, God shows himself to us that we may indeed strive to know and love Him. On this night we learn that God's gift of revelation comes to us not in the form of a book or a theory, but in a person. Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, opens for us the truth. We come to know it and experience it not in abstract, but in a way of living founded on our relationship with him. Then the truth which God lovingly offers us is indeed within our grasp, as the story we celebrate this night makes so clear.

Tonight, then, we draw lessons for our living. St Paul is forthright, as you would expect: 'God's grace has been revealed and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race and taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God.' This is the challenge of this Holy Night. God alone is the One who, properly understood, rejects no-one, forgives all, and invites us into the fullness of life itself. With God we live not with our eyes fixed simply on short-term happiness and gain, but on a long-term hope which carries us beyond sight and understanding to 'the blessings which will come with the Appearing in glory of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus'.

Tonight we go out of our way to wish each other a Happy Christmas and New Year. May our good wishes be founded on the glory of the gift we receive in Christ Jesus. Our Happiness lies in Him, as he blesses our families and all our efforts. Our prospering in the New Year is best founded on the call of the Lord that in all we do we are never forgetful of those in need around us, especially in these testing times. We have a special prayer in our hearts for the Christians of Iraq who celebrate Christmas this year under such a threat of violence.

The family of the crib, whom we praise this night, is a symbol of human solidarity, to be kept in our hearts long after the holidays are over. This will direct us in a continuing care for the most vulnerable and sustain us in a unity of effort. It is also a revelation of the truth of God. With this in my heart, I wish you all a very happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

+Vincent Nichols