

Homily for Midnight Mass
Westminster Cathedral
Christmas 2011

Tonight we proclaim with joy the birth of Jesus, Saviour of the world. We do so in many ways: by blessing the crib, depicting that precious moment itself; by the resonant words we hear: 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light'; by the music that fills this cathedral 'O magnum mysterium'; by the solemn announcing of the Gospel: 'And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger' and by our presence here at this midnight hour.

'What's going on?' passers-by might ask. We are proclaiming the birth of Christ, two thousand years ago, yet as important today as it was then, for he is Saviour of the world.

We are proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God come in our flesh and blood, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary.

This is our faith. This is the joy of this night, rich beyond all others, for in these events the course of human destiny is made clear and our sense of purpose in life changed.

Yet in all the small details of this event - the stable, the ox and the ass, the shepherds with their sheep - and amidst all the splendour of the glory of God, one underlying fact remains breath-taking and calls for our reflection. It is this: that the eternal God, creator of all things, in order to fulfil the great design of his love, had first to ask the permission of one of his own creation. God's saving work is dependent on Mary saying 'yes', granting her permission for her creator to carry out this plan for our salvation.

And if this is true of Mary, then it is true of us too.

Let me put it like this. Without Jesus Christ there is no Gospel, no revelation of the immense love of God for each one of us, or of the true meaning of our lives. Yet without our witness to this truth, the Gospel will not be known.

Christ is central to the Gospel and we are essential to its proclamation. In this God, our creator, is dependent on us, his creation. God is waiting for our 'yes', just as he waited for Mary's. God needs our permission for the Gospel to be proclaimed.

We who gather here this night enjoy the great privilege of the gift of faith. We have within our hearts a sharp sense of God's abiding presence in our lives. We are here because we acknowledge Jesus as the fullness of that presence in our midst. Of course our practical recognition of him as 'Our Lord' sways this way and that, sometimes full of fervour, sometimes neglected and distant. But here and now we rejoice in the gift of faith.

So, tonight, as we ponder this sacred birth, we are also to reflect on the duty that goes with this gift, this privilege of faith. Our faith in God, our awareness of God's

unfailing love, brings with it responsibility and obligation. There is, with faith, an accompanying question: 'What am I to do?'

Three things.

We are to see clearly the reality of the world around us. As we look at the real circumstances of Christ's birth so too we look with fresh eyes on the anxieties and insecurity which touch many peoples' lives. We are to be freshly attentive to the needs of those who, like Jesus himself, are displaced and in discomfort. We are to see more clearly all those things which disfigure our world, the presence of the sins of greed and arrogance, of self-centred ambition and manipulation of others, of the brutal lack of respect for human life in all its vulnerability. While recognising how complex moral dilemmas can become, we are to name these things for what they are. We too live 'in a land of deep shadow.'

That shadow falls particularly heavily on the town of Bethlehem tonight. At this moment the people of the parish of Beit Jala prepare for their legal battle to protect their land and homes from further expropriation by Israel. Over 50 families face losing their land and their homes as action is taken to complete the separation/security wall across the territory of the district of Bethlehem. We pray for them tonight.

Then, secondly, we are to look with fresh wonder at those closest to us, seeing again their goodness and their loyalty, their readiness to forgive and their desire to care for us. In offering our 'yes' to the Lord, we are to respond together with kindness and forgiveness, with generosity and compassion to those in need. Together we become, day by day, an instrument of Christ's continuing mission in our world, even to imitating his self-sacrificing love for others. In the words of St Paul we are to be a people with 'no ambition except to do good.'

St Paul also points to the third aspect of our task. He tells us that hope is the key. We live in a world in which the prospects for the future, in the terms the world can offer, are distinctly shaky. Yet we find an unshakable hope in our Saviour. As we celebrate his birth we remember that he is to come again. And it is this coming that gives us our enduring hope. St Paul tells us that we can only fulfil the duties of faith if we are a people who 'are waiting in hope for the blessings which will come with the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus.'

The birth of Christ shows us that the narrative of life offered by the world, an account of human life which does not see beyond the confines of the created world, is only half the story. This birth shines a light into our world which dissolves those boundaries and opens up new and startling horizons, going beyond the vision of earthly eyes and confirming as true the hope that comes with faith: hope in eternal life and in a final destiny of fulfilment for all things, hope in one who has overcome every limitation, even death itself.

Tonight let us renew that gift of faith. Let us celebrate its joy, its comfort and its challenge. Let us be ready to play our part in word and deed. As we celebrate the loving response of Mary to God's invitation, let us ask her to encourage us always to offer our 'yes' and, staying close to her Son, confidently put our faith into practice each day.

Then indeed this will be a happy and a blessed Christmas. And I can wish you no more than that. Amen

+Vincent Nichols
24-12-11