

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Christmas Day 2023 (Year B)

'The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light'. The darkness of these December days makes this phrase pulled out of Isaiah's prophecy really stand out, it really speaks to us. There is so much darkness: not just the darkness of a winter night, but so much darkness in the world, in the human heart, in the prospects for peace, stability and justice. The battle between darkness and light seems to be raging constantly in the world of human affairs.

But the light that we celebrate at Christmas is not just a momentary flash of brightness, here and gone; it is not a light that dazzles and blinds, like an undipped headlight, it is a light that illuminates and enlightens, makes clear and reveals. And what it reveals to us is a scene of staggering beauty. We catch a glimpse, brightly lit, of a mother and a child, her husband, animals, shepherds, a stable, and the light seems to shine on it, but also to shine from it. It probably is only a glimpse, because none of us has time to stop and stare, but it is an intoxicating scene all the same. Like a scene in a lighted room glimpsed from a passing train we see something that is both incredibly simple and amazingly complex, but by the time we have had a moment to process it, it is gone. This Christmas feast draws its meaning from stopping the train for a moment, pausing the motion, so that we can look more deeply, even if it is only for a few moments.

The great light that Isaiah spoke of draws us in from the darkness, and invites us to pause for a while. It is a strange thing, really, because what the light reveals is a rag-tag band of figures: a young woman who looks almost too young to be a mother, and an older man who looks too old to be a father; farm animals all around - strange companions for a fragile human baby, surely; shepherds fresh from the fields, very much soaked in the smell of the sheep, none too clean; angels - can that really be angels, too? It is a motley band, but there is something entrancing about the scene, something which brings this mismatched group together with a great sense of order, a great sense that strange as they may all seem individually, put together they become remarkable, and beautiful - even, strangely, a vision of perfection. What is it about this scene that is so magnetic? Why do we find it so very hard to leave?

This scene that we catch sight of, these figures assembled according to what seems to be some ancient stage direction is extraordinarily beautiful. This is because, although on the surface it is just a random group of mismatched figures, in fact it is a vision of eternity, a vision of Heaven. There, at the centre, is God himself, flanked by Mary and Joseph, the saints who look on and adore; then there are the ordinary folk, represented by the shepherds, also on their knees in wonder, and above them the angels: God, surrounded by saints, ordinary people and angels - indeed the animals represent for us the whole of creation, so all that God has made bows and adores. That is why the crib is so electrifying: it gives us a vision of Heaven, and draws us in. Something that we see here is very, very true. We look in and see, and from the mess and the madness of our tragically broken world we see what a world of harmony might look like, and we realise that this is reality, this is how it was meant to be.

What makes a feast a true feast, what makes a festival a festival? Not just calling it one, for sure, nor just having the right props and putting on jollity. What makes a festival real is the sense that you are celebrating something very real and very true, something that draws you deep into the heart of what it means to be human. It leads you to understand something about what life is really all about, how it should be spent, and so the best of feasts will change us.

Do you remember how Christmas felt as a child? There was such a sense of excitement, and wonder, such a sense that anything could happen, that this was really going to be the best day of all. Somewhere along the line cynicism undermined all that and turned wonder and delight into chores and tiredness. But that only happens to our celebration if we wander away from the crib. The crib reminds us that this is not about food, or gifts, or even about family and friends: it is about Heaven, and the way it can suddenly break into our world. There are all manner of strange people gathered around the crib, but there are no cynics.

In a way it would be lovely to stay at the crib for longer - to stop the train as it races past the lighted window and to gaze in; to revel in the harmony that so amazes us; to stare at every little detail, to hear every little sound, every animal snort and every babyish whimper. Lovely as this would be, we will have to go back to everyday life, we cannot remain here looking at this little Heaven for ever (time enough for that in the next life). We cannot stay for ever, because there are things to be done just to keep the world ticking over. We cannot stay here for ever, and we cannot take the crib with us. We will have to force ourselves to turn away and leave Bethlehem. We cannot stay, and nor can we sustain every moment of every day the sense of wonder that comes from gazing on this little Heaven. But if we cannot stay, and cannot take it with us, there is one thing that we can do. We can remember how it made us feel: we can remember that this scene of harmony and beauty and love, the place from which a tidal wave of love was loosed upon the world, still slopping about for all of time, we can remember how it made us feel that all will be well, and that we can be better people, can be ones who might fit in at the crib, we can remember how it made us feel that the world is young and beautiful again, and that anything is possible. Then Christmas really can become real, really can flood out into our all-year-round lives. Then *"The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, And Christmas comes once more."*