

## Homily for Christmas 2019

In one of the scripture texts for the Masses of Christmas the prophet Isaiah looks forward to the renewed people of God, as they will be once they have been transformed by the coming of the Saviour, and he joyfully says: *'you shall be called 'my Delight'...for the Lord takes delight in you'* (Isaiah 62.4). Delight is a beautiful thing; one person's heart takes flight with joy because of someone they have seen. A child whose parent has been away sees them coming through the door after all these days and their face is filled with delight, on fire with excited joy, and wonder, and a pleasure they cannot control. How beautiful this is for the parent who sees it; it is a most amazing thing to find that someone is delighted to see me, delighted by my presence. It is almost enough to make you leap for joy, because you have been found delightful. And so when Isaiah says that the Father will delight in us, that the God the Father's heart will sing and dance because of us, that is a most amazing feeling. Can this be true? Can this be right? Can I bring delight to the Father, poor me, foolish me, compromised, damaged and conflicted me, with all my failings and my foolish faults? On my own, of course, I am far from delightful. But here is the wonder of Christmas: Jesus Christ has come on a rescue mission: he has come to rescue me from all that dims the light of God in me, and to make me delightful in the eyes of God the Father. Christmas is God's rescue mission, aimed at turning the damaged into the delightful.

Gathered around the Christmas crib, looking into this stable, we find utter simplicity. How unlike our own homes, and workplaces this is, how unlike all the places where we spend so much time. In this crib there is barely anything that is the work of human hands: a rough manger meant only to hold animal feed but now containing the Son of The Most High, and some rough and ready everyday clothes worn by the actors in the drama, and that is it. Everything else belongs to the world of nature. There is nothing complex here, nothing technical, nothing clever. It is utter simplicity, and as we stop and look for a while into this simple scene we are overcome with a sense of longing. How complicated our lives are, how complicated our world is, how complex we have made it, but the sight of this very simple scene awakens in us a real heartache for a simpler world, a simpler life. Of course, we cannot run away from all the details of modern life: all the technology that often frustrates us also can make our lives better, and so it would be foolish to turn our backs on it. But the first gift of Christmas is to revive in us this longing for simplicity, this sense that somehow we have allowed ourselves to be turned into servants, even slaves, of the machines that were meant to make our lives better. It is good to make use of all that modern life places at our disposal to make life better, but looking into the crib we are reminded that while all the gadgets and the gizmos and the things and the stuff can make life easier, they can also get in the way of the simple things that are truly beautiful. Deep down we know this, but often it gets lost. Some of you know that I am a great fan of Desert Island Discs on the radio, and it always fascinates me that when people are offered a luxury item to take to the island it is seldom anything very complicated or technical. More likely it is something very simple: a pen, or a bath or a hot water bottle or a pillow. This speaks of the deep longing for simplicity which most of us have to struggle to keep hold of.

Mary is the perfect example of someone who knows how to revel in simplicity. In some astonishingly beautiful words the poet Paul Claudel wonders at the expectant Mary:

*Mary -- heavy with her burden, having conceived of the Holy Spirit --  
Withdrew far from the sight of men, in the depths of the underground oratory,  
Like the dove in the Canticle that flies away to the cleft in the rock.  
She does not move, she says not a word, she adores.  
She is interior to the world, for her God is no longer outside.  
He is her work and her son and her darling and the fruit of her womb!*

(Paul Claudel, Hymne au Sacré-Cœur in Leiva-Merikakis Fire of Mercy, Heart of the World).

‘She does not move, she says not a word, she adores.’ Really there is little more to say about the wonder of Christmas. All the activity is fun and the games and the food and the laughter, it is all great fun and it is all life-giving, but none of it can match the motionless silent adoration of Mary.

Christmas is God’s rescue mission, in which he sends his Son to us to make us delightful. Do I want to bring joy to the heart of the Father? Of course I do, who could not want that. Do I want to be delightful? Yes, of course. This child who we come to kneel before today has an extraordinary power to draw out from us a longing for a better life, a longing for simplicity, and goodness, and a way of living where everything is good, and honest and true, and everything can be taken at its face value. As we look at this child the regret we feel at all that we could have been, but have not; all that we could have done, but have not; all that we could have said, but did not: all this regret is overtaken by a sense that better things are possible, they lie within our grasp. The ‘me’ who leaves the crib can be a better ‘me’ than the one who arrived. And this combination of sadness at what we have been, and longing for something greater, which the simple crib draws out of us, this combination makes us beautiful because it is the mark of a sleeper who has woken, a human being who has fully come to life. And this brings delight to the heart of the Father, and Christmas has begun to work its magic once again, and the rescue mission has worked, and we are delightful, and the angels sing, and for a few moments at least all is beautiful. And, silent in the background Mary smiles as she does not move and says not a word, and she adores. For the one who has brought about this change in us is her work, and her son and her darling and the fruit of her womb.