

## Homily for Christmas 2020

‘Let us go to Bethlehem and see’ the shepherds say to one another when the angels leave them. The angels came to bring them joyful news of an amazing event that had happened close by; the angels, however, do not say to the shepherds ‘you must go and look’. They just tell the shepherds what has happened, and then they leave. It is the shepherds who decide, given that this event is so amazing, and it has happened just close by, that they want to see for themselves. There is nothing quite like seeing something with your own eyes. People can describe it to us, of course, or nowadays record it, photograph it, film it, but all the same it never quite captures the full experience: the shepherds want to see the baby and his family for themselves, but also to smell the stable, touch the coarse wood of its door, peer through the dim light, hear the little cries of the newborn child, the gentle soothing of Mary and Joseph, the calling of the animals. They know what is there, but they want to immerse themselves in the scene, in every aspect of what has happened, so that this experience will be firmly etched in their minds for the rest of their lives and will be written deeply in their souls. This is something they never want to forget.

There is a glorious mirror here of what is going on when Christ, the Son of God, takes on human flesh and comes to live among us. The shepherds go to Bethlehem to immerse themselves in the scene: to feel it, touch it, hear it, smell it so that it becomes a part of who they are. They will go back to the fields as new men. Jesus comes to live among us so that his knowledge of what it is to be human is not based on observing from a distance. Like the shepherds, he wants to taste, and touch, and feel and see and hear and smell human life. He wants to know human life from the inside. He wants to know our lives from the inside. He wants to know hunger so that he can be a brother to the hungry; he wants to know pain so that he can be a brother to the suffering, know grief so that he can be a brother to the sorrowing. He wants to allow himself to be powerless so that he can for all time be a brother to the powerless. From this day onwards, and for every day, he is a brother to the powerless, the sorrowing, the unloved and the rejected, the misunderstood – as well, of course, as to the joyful and the generous, the good, the just and the kind. But it is in our times of trouble that we look around despairingly for someone who will understand, someone who will share this load, someone who has experienced the same, someone who recognizes what we feel in the memory of how he once felt; someone who identifies the very experience we are undergoing as exactly like some experience that he once had, so that his humanity, and our humanity, merge and we are no longer lost.

When the shepherds rush to the stable, obeying some instinct that calls them to share in this amazing thing, to be part of it and make it part of them, this mirrors exactly Christ’s decision to rush to our side, to throw himself into our lives and to experience them just as we do. The shepherds go back to the fields as changed men, for they have found a universal brother; a brother who will store away in his heart every experience of earthly life so that no human joy nor sorrow, no human hope nor fear, no human triumph nor disaster will be alien, and in Heaven there is a heart that has felt everything that any human heart may ever feel. But there is more to it than that. The Prophet Isaiah says [Mass of the Day] *‘Listen! Your*

*watchmen raise their voices, they shout for joy together, for they see the Lord face to face*'. Like the watchmen of Jerusalem, the shepherds see the Lord face to face. They gaze into the eyes that looked on the world as it was created, on the original man, the model of all human living. No wonder they go back to the fields as changed men. Because, and this is so important, Jesus comes to us at Christmas to recognize in us the humanity we share, to know us and to reintroduce us to our true selves. Jesus comes to us at Christmas to reintroduce us to our true selves. This is simply beyond beautiful. All of us know that, to a greater or lesser extent, we are not the person we could be; perhaps we are not even the person that we once were. Perhaps we are aware that parts of our lives are not as they should be; that parts of the garden of our souls are overgrown, weedy, neglected; that we have compromised or capitulated and allowed ourselves to settle for something less than the best. This is, of course, far from alien to Jesus, because he knows temptation well, although unlike us he does not succumb: here, too, he knows our experience from the inside. Looking into the manger, seeing perfection and beauty, seeing hope and wonder, seeing one who is newborn but is also more ancient than all of creation, the shepherds catch a glimpse of the people they could be. Looking on the Son of Man face to face, they are reintroduced to the true them, the best of them, what they always had the potential to be.

On this day/night we come to the manger in many ways conflicted and confused, as the shepherds were. There is so much that we don't understand, so many questions that we cannot find answers to, so many things that we wish were different. But the Lord gently reintroduces us to the person that we could be. That really is the magic and the joy of Christmas: not that something extraordinary happened long ago, but that something extraordinary can happen now: not far away in Bethlehem, but here. Meeting once again the person I could be will I embrace that vision again? Will I let that happen in me? Then the angels will have something to sing about, and the Christmas bells will ring!