

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Christmas Day (Year A)  
25<sup>th</sup> December 2022

If Christmas is just a chance to commemorate something that happened long, long ago in a place far away from here – as one might remember the fall of Troy, which is rather a good story, or the founding of the city of Rome, which is also rather an interesting tale, then it would just be one more quaint legend, an interesting study in literary style and ancient history, no more than that.

But Christmas is much more than a commemoration of something that happened long ago and far away. Christmas is happening now, and we are part of the story. Christmas is a way of life, a version of humanity, that began two thousand years ago and continues to this day. Without Christmas, the world would be indescribably different, and incalculably poorer.

So, what is this Christmas mystery that we celebrate today? The Word became flesh, and made his home among us. Faith in God is no longer just a matter of words, it is now a question of flesh, too. It is not just about what we hear and what we say, it is about physicality, about actions, about what we do, about how we live. In celebrating the mystery of Christmas we are invited to travel to Bethlehem – that is the point of our Christmas crib, to draw us home, home to Bethlehem. This little city is home; it is home for us, and home for all humanity. It is not only the place where the earthly life of Christ begins, it is also the home where we are all born, where all human life originates, it is the place where a new way of living, of relating to the people around us and the world around us, commences. At Christmas we travel, like Joseph, back to our roots, back to our place of origin, back to the place where we can discover afresh who we really are. Travelling back to Bethlehem we are reborn, and we emerge into a world transformed, a world that, from the first Christmas onwards, can never be the same again.

So, when we return home on this day, home to Bethlehem, what do we find there?

We find a low house – no house at all, really, just a stable. Even today the church at Bethlehem has a low door to remind us that it was always a low house, a small place, a place of no obvious importance. And so we discover once again that the way of living that began at Christmas is a way of smallness and insignificance. While other people have grandiose plans and publicise themselves and their ideas, Bethlehem is very different. It's very simple, it's just a child and his young, rather overwhelmed mother, and his foster father, and that is it. There doesn't seem to be anything very earth-shattering in this scene, but we know better. The truth is that the earth-shattering thing about this scene is its very littleness. It proclaims to the world a new sort of greatness, that is found in insignificance and service and love and hiddenness. If we are going to live Christmas, not just today but every day, this message of the primacy of littleness is essential. Let other people proclaim their own greatness and importance if they want; it will never be very convincing – much better than proclaiming our greatness is to live greatness – the greatness of the servant, of the lover, of the one who finds their joy and their fulfilment in making the lives of others better.

Coming home to Bethlehem, we find this little scene is focussed on the littlest of all, a newborn child. Last year Pope Francis described it like this:

*“The One who embraces the universe needs to be held in another’s arms. The One who created the sun needs to be warmed. Tenderness incarnate needs to be cuddled. Infinite love has a miniscule heart that beats softly. The eternal Word is an “infant”, a speechless child. The Bread of life needs to be nourished. The Creator of the world has no home.”*

This child has such a life ahead of him, a life the actors in the scene could not even begin to imagine, but for now he lies there, loved by his mother and so all is well. This is the Son of God, who entered our world not reluctantly, like a petulant child sent to a party he doesn’t want to attend, but joyful and full of enthusiasm. When the time has come and the Father speaks his word, his Son bounds and leaps to our assistance; how he has longed for this moment to come, for the chance to set us free.

*‘When peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful word’ (Wisdom 18.14)*

At home, in Bethlehem, we find a low home, a house of humility and insignificance, but a place that is somehow buzzing with the energy of the Word, leapt to our salvation and our rescue. We find here a safe place – not safe for the child, who Herod will soon want to get rid of, but safe for us. Precisely because it is a house of littleness we can pour our hearts out here. We cannot make ourselves vulnerable, admit our weakness and our uncertainty, in a gilded throne room to the haughty and the great, but here among the little ones we can be vulnerable. The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said *‘The most holy thing about a church is that it’s a place where people go to weep’* and this holiness is all drawn from the Christmas stable the first Church. Here we can come and weep for a world turned violent, for wasted opportunities, for angry words that should never have been spoken, for opportunities for kindness that we have missed, for losses that we feel we can hardly bear, for anxieties and fears that haunt our nights, and every tear shed at the manger falls into the house of humility, the house of salvation, and bears fruit in grace and forgiveness. We become a little more truly ourselves, more truly the people God has dreamed that we might be.

At Christmas the world is given another chance. Again the extraordinary patience of God speaks to us and says, ‘No, no, no, you haven’t been listening, you have lost the way once more, you have been distracted and diverted. Let me show you once again, let me act the story out once again, let me ask you to join me in the drama again, kneel at the manger and watch, watch closely, watch again the story, the story of what you might become, the story of human life lived to the full. It goes like this....’