

‘Loving us from the inside-out’ – A Homily for Christmas Day

Isaiah 9.2-7

Titus 2.11-14

Luke 2.1-14

‘While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth.’

I’m going to be honest with you and say that the last eighteen months have made me feel somewhat fragile. So many of the things we have taken for granted that keep us safe and secure have taken something of a bashing. Our rhythm of life, our job security, our physical and mental health, the ability to gather with friends, even our global systems have been pushed to breaking point by COVID-19, and it has been, and continues to be, really rough.

And the world in which we live doesn’t really like to admit its fragility or anxiety, it would rather help us pretend we are invulnerable. As the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor tells us, we have created a sense of a ‘buffered self,’ in which we share ‘a sense of power, of capacity, in being able to order our world and ourselves.’ This self is characterised by ‘power, reason and invulnerability,’ and ‘a decisive distancing from age-old fears.’ It is this sense of the ‘buffered self’ that has recently been shaken to the core.

But what does it mean to be truly human? Is it really to be a self-contained individual, self-created and self-assured, an atomised person at the centre of our own world? Or does it mean to be turned-outward to others in openness and vulnerability, an openness and vulnerability that our religious tradition dares to call love?

It is no wonder we are all feeling somewhat fragile, but this fragility, though costly, is able to bring us together. It reminds us that we need each other. To really make a world of meaning together, we need compassion, patience, nurture and love. We have seen this movement of love in those volunteering to offer people vaccine boosters, or else dropping in food parcels to their neighbours, we have seen it in people visiting elderly relatives, even if only to sit outside and speak to them through a closed window, we have seen it in words

of hope and encouragement shared with people who know only anxiety and dread.

Today we come together to celebrate a hope that is born in the wreckage of human empire and civilisation; a light that is kindled in the darkest of nights; a peace that is proclaimed in a context of spiralling violence. But this hope, light and peace is not some supernatural visitation from another place, but is rather seen in an ordinary human birth , a birth that happens to a young peasant family on the edge of poverty. This hope, light and peace is laid in a feeding trough surrounded by mucky animals, kept warm by swaddling bands, bails of hay and a young mother's love. Not much security here and nothing of invulnerability or autonomy. Just a simple birth: messy, risky, scary.

But our Gospel writers dare to tell us that God's power is seen most clearly here, not so much in the majestic beauty of the mountains and the seas (though it is glimpsed there), not so much in the endless mystery of the cosmos (though it is glimpsed there as well), but instead in the delicate beauty of a human life.

Indeed, God comes to us in our stumbling weakness, in the flailing limbs and gurgling noises of a little infant, in order to love us from the inside-out. Jesus shows us that we do not need to be superheroes, locked up in splendid isolation from the dangers of our world, but that rather we come more fully to life as we become vulnerable to each other. If God can be like this for us, trusting himself to us, then perhaps we can begin to trust ourselves to others, and even to let go of the need to create ourselves and our world, and instead begin to rest in the love that lets us and our world be?

God's power and presence made known in our frail human flesh. 'And this will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' AMEN.