

CHRISTMAS DAY 2016

St Patrick's Cathedral Armagh

HOLY GROUND AT CHRISTMAS

Have you ever wondered whether, if you had been around in Bethlehem on what we might reasonably call the first Christmas Day, you would have noticed anything out of the ordinary?

There's a wonderful painting by the great Flemish artist, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, "The Census at Bethlehem". Bruegel, as was his style, updated the setting to his own time and place. What we see is a sixteenth century Flemish village on a late winter afternoon and, in typical Bruegel fashion, full of extraordinarily ugly Flemish peasants. There are people ice-skating, young boys throwing snow balls, people slipping on the ice, and a crowd gathered around an inn that seems to be doubling as a pub and a census booth. There are a number of huge barrels of beer on wagons, and even what appears to be an ingenious individual who, out of sight of the crowd, is sneakily helping himself to some of the beer from the back of one of the large barrels. There are so many interesting things going on that you have to look rather closely to notice, near one of the wagons, an ordinary looking man leading a donkey with a young woman on its back; the woman (if you look very closely) might be pregnant.. The couple don't look very different to anyone else. You could easily miss them as you looked at the painting. There are no halos, no gorgeous robes. They're no more beautiful than anyone else around. Unremarkable in every way.. What is happening looks very matter-of-fact and commonplace, even trivial, but its significance could not be more immense – *God in himself* there, right in the midst of us.

And this is surely the way reality works. *Everything that happens* occurs in two dimensions, not in contradiction to each other or as totally separated in a strange dualism, but rather in two realms of being that do indeed connect. The Russian writer Boris Pasternak explains this wonderfully in his great novel, *Dr Zhivago*. He writes of what he calls a *comforting awareness* that all that happens in the world takes place not only on the earth that buries the dead but also in another dimension known to some as the Kingdom of God. This understanding of reality is at the heart of the Christmas message and the Christmas story – sheer ordinariness at one level, and yet for those with the eyes to see beyond and behind the ordinary, heaven and earth have met. The poet George Herbert spoke of finding "heaven in ordinary" and apparently he could and did this in his everyday life.

Christmas, then, invites us to see beyond or rather *through* the ordinary and the mundane and see divine reality behind it. Furthermore, it invites us to look beyond the apparently ordinary and mundane appearance of another person and see Jesus Christ behind that seemingly dull or even dilapidated exterior. And yet the culture with which we surround ourselves invites us, not to see heaven in ordinary but instead to devote our time and attention to isolating ourselves from any worthwhile reality. Productiveness is everything; reflectiveness is wastefulness. We see this in that another person's prevalent obsessiveness that would sooner communicate on a mobile phone with some absent third party – almost certainly quite unnecessarily - rather than talk to (or even sit in silence with) the real person facing you over a dinner table.

The gift of Christmas is surely the gift of being able to see Christ in one another. It is not always an easy gift to receive or to use. Jean Vanier, who has for so many years worked in the l'Arche

community with all sorts and conditions of people - some disabled, some not, some generous, some miserable, some happy, some in the depth of depression, some unable to communicate at all - speaks of times of sheer terror when a genuine openness to other people quickly exposes us to the task of having to face ourselves.

It is far easier to isolate ourselves and to see only the vapid externals of life, if indeed anything at all beyond our own obsessive productiveness. When we move beyond this shallowness into seeing the truly divine in others we are, of course, placing ourselves at risk. But yet the place on which we will be standing with them is *holy ground*. It is not only a church building or cathedral or even some ancient religious site that is holy ground. You and I are not taking our leave of holy ground when we leave the cathedral this morning. *Holy ground is* that place, wherever it may be, where the life of God is recognised and encountered in relationships with other people.

I suppose that, when I'm in one of my more thoughtful modes, I would admit that one of the far too few things I may have learnt over the years is that silence is not a bad thing; indeed it's rather a good thing, even (and perhaps especially) within close relationships. You need to know someone well and to *see them properly*, and even to see through them properly, and for them to know you properly and to see through you, before silence is an appropriate way to enjoy one another's company. This is assuredly part of what it is for the presence of God to be within a relationship, a holy ground where the earthly and heavenly meet.

T S Eliot expressed this brilliantly, when he castigated the superficiality of much of modern life –

Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words and ignorance of the Word.

At the conclusion of this Eucharist there is a traditional Christmas blessing. It is the blessing of Christ “who in his Incarnation gathered into one all things earthly and heavenly”. When we place a line between earthly and heavenly, when we see the heavenly as being a separate rarefied chamber, a separate compartment from everyday life, whether in a Flemish village or in an Ulster town, we are missing the point not only of Christmas but of Christianity itself. No, everything that takes place on earth takes place in another dimension known to some of us as the Kingdom of God.