

Homily for Christmas 2008

There is something rather strange about the first Christmas Day. On one level it is very ordinary, even commonplace: a young woman gives birth to her son in great simplicity and some poverty, far from home in a borrowed bed that is not even a bed for humans, but the home of animals. That is what is going on at the centre of the story. But all around there are some very strange things happening indeed, the natural way of things has in fact been totally disrupted. Both Mary and Joseph have had encounters with angels; Mary's cousin Elizabeth has unexpectedly conceived a child, and Mary herself is expecting her child through the action of the Holy Spirit. The child who is to be born is not only Mary's son, but God's son as well. Through Mary Heaven and Earth are united in Christ, and as he is born there is a great flash of heavenly activity: for a short time the afterglow of Christ's appearance is seen in the mysterious star and in the choir of angels that stir the shepherds into action. These miraculous events, which seem so alien to our everyday experience, so unlike ordinary life, make it clear that something unique has happened here.

In this newborn baby, Heaven and Earth are locked together, because he is both human and divine; he is the point where Heaven and Earth meet, and they can never be parted again. From the creation of the world God has longed for man, and man has longed for God: in Christ those two longings meet: like two magnets set free of all restraint the two longings career towards each other, and at Bethlehem they crash into one another and lock together with a flash of energy that disturbs and re-orientates both time and creation.

The true wonder of Christmas, of course, is nothing to do with trees and tinsel, and food and drink, and gifts and cards, or even parties and reunions. These are all things that we create ourselves. All the real celebrations of human existence are down to things beyond our control. The things we do can be marvellous, but the things God does are the ones that are really worth celebrating, and what God does for us at Christmas is beautiful beyond words.

The story, of course, begins long ago. In the account of creation told in Genesis, the final act of creation is different to all the others. All the other acts of creation are entirely external to God: let there be light, let there be a vault, let the earth produce, let the waters be alive; the final act of creation is different. It is not 'let there be men' but 'let us make man in our own image...' (Gen 1.26; see Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship* p.33). Humankind, the final created being, is linked from the very beginning to God, because humans are made in his image. So it is that from the very beginning God longs for humans to be united to him, and every human being has a deep longing for God, a deep longing to be united with that in whose image it was made, a profound nostalgia for the Holy Trinity (Corbon op cit).

The real power of Christmas, the power that it has to unsettle and disturb us, is that we see in this child all our deepest longings exposed and fulfilled. This was what inspired St. Augustine to write the famous sentence at the start of his *Confessions* "You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you" (Book 1.1) Later in the same book he describes how, aware that he longed for something, that he lacked something that he desperately needed, he looked for peace and satisfaction in every material thing until:

"You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst; you touched me, and I burned for your peace." (Book 10, 27/38)

That call, that shout, that blaze - these are what we see and hear in the birth of Christ, who is the answer to all our longings.

Most of us lack the clarity of vision of St. Augustine. Most of us are aware that, however comfortable our lives may be, however happy, however filled with love and affection, there is something still we lack, but we are unsure what it might be. For most of the year we manage to put this to the back of our minds, but at Christmas it all breaks through. What I long for, what every human being longs for because it is a longing built into human nature, is God. It is impossible to be human without having deep within our hearts a longing for God. Of course, while some of us hear this and

weep because, at last, it all makes sense, there will be others who are puzzled. They do not recognise this longing. They would say 'no, it is not God I long for, I long for happiness'; but happiness, blessedness, the sense that everything around me is exactly as it should be - that happiness is what Christ describes in the Beatitudes: the fullest and most perfect experience of happiness is found in God's kingdom. Reduced to its bare essentials, a longing for happiness is a longing for God. Or they might say I long for peace; but peace is a fundamental element of the nature of God. Christ is the Prince of Peace (Isa 9.5) and one of the key characteristics of The Trinity is that three persons exist not in rivalry or enmity, but in perfect harmony and peace. A longing for peace is a longing for God. People might say 'I long for wisdom and for understanding'. But a longing for understanding is a longing for Heaven, the only place where at last all will become clear: there we will know all and, far better than that, we will be perfectly known and understood: "Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now I can know only imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known" (1 Cor. 13.12).

Whatever we long for: life, wisdom, beauty, truth, security, freedom, all these things find their perfection in God. Any authentic human longing is no more than an expression of our longing for God, our nostalgia for him who created us. And Christmas is the Feast that makes it clear to us that this longing need no longer go unfulfilled. Whatever it is that you seek to make you happy, it is offered to you here today. So when the turkey is eaten, and the tinsel has come down and those whose celebration of Christmas was based only around created things have gone back to everyday life never quite as satisfied as they had hoped to be, we can live as men, women and children renewed. I hope that you all have a very Happy Christmas - good food and drink, fun with friends and family, good health, safe journeys; but above all, and herein lies the real secret of a Happy Christmas, may your celebration of this feast leave you renewed, transformed, able to see life differently and to live life differently because you know that because of this feast all your deepest longings can be fulfilled; you need search no longer, you have found that which your heart desires.