

## Homily for Christmas 2009

In many ways 2009 will not be a year to be remembered with much happiness. Unemployment has been increasing, incomes have been decreasing; terrible numbers of soldiers have been dying in a war that nobody really understands; politicians have been caught cheating and stealing from the people who elected them; the threat of an epidemic disease has left us worried and fearful; we are promised huge cuts in public services, and we are left wondering whether we will be able to educate our young people, care for our sick people, or even defend ourselves. It has always been traditional for the British to say that the country is going to the dogs, but now we do it with an uneasy feeling that something fundamental has changed, and changed for the worse. In the middle of all this, however, we resolutely insist on braving the weather to come to mass, at a time of day (or night) that is far from convenient, to celebrate the birth of a baby two thousand years ago in a country far from our own. What can such an apparently trivial event possibly have to do with our worrying world?

The fact of the matter is, of course, that this is not just the birth of any baby. This birth has been longed for, hoped for, searched for, over many centuries. Eight hundred years before this day Isaiah looked forward to it and saw what joy it would bring; he did not know when it would happen, or where, or how, but he caught a glimpse of what would take place and he saw the future generation rejoicing ‘as men rejoice at harvest time’. This is not just a random image. There is a special character to harvest rejoicing. We have lost some sense of its urgency in our world of plenty, but men rejoice at harvest time because they know that, whatever else may happen, the stuff of life is safely stored for another year. Until the harvest is in, there is always the chance of starvation, but a good harvest removes one of the greatest of uncertainties. Whatever else may happen, war, or invasion, or disease, at least now that the harvest is safe there is a chance of survival. Once the harvest is safe, people can begin to look to the future; before that moment everything is provisional, everything is in doubt. Men rejoice at harvest with a special intensity because, come what may, the basic necessities of life are there.

The birth of Christ is very similar. Until that day everything stood in doubt: can we be sure that God is interested in our world; can we be sure that he loves us; can we even be sure that he exists? Now that his own son has been born with us and for us, everything is different. We have the basic stuff of life, and however badly things go wrong, the bottom line is that all will be well. So men rejoice over this birth as at harvest. First of all Mary rejoices with Joseph; then the angels catch on, and the joy is so infectious that it cannot help but spread. There was no particular need for the angel to tell the shepherds what has happened, they are not strictly necessary to the child, but this is not the sort of news that can be contained; nothing can stop the news, and the joy that goes with it, from spilling out of the stable and spreading to the fields nearby. The angel tells the shepherds that there is something here to really rejoice about, news of great joy ‘that will be for all the people’. This is news for sharing. So little by little the message spreads from person to person, from town to town, from country to country until all the world is soaked in the song of the angels and the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now, at last, after thousands of years of waiting, we can finally be sure. God is with us, God is one of us. Without this simple truth human life would be meaningless,

because it would not be leading anywhere. But we know that God comes close to us, and so whatever sort of a year we have had, the bottom line is that all will be well. There is nothing that a lover wants more than to be with the beloved. If only I can have the one that I love beside me, I can cope with anything. I can overcome any fear, I can survive any tragedy, I can move mountains. The presence of the one that I love makes all things possible. For so many years Israel had longed for the one that she loved; longed for God to be really, physically present, longed to hear his voice and feel his touch. Now she does, and that is why the angels sing. And this presence will never be withdrawn, never end. Beneath all the tinsel and the carols and the mulled wine and the office parties and the huge meals, this is the real magic of Christmas, and if we could truly let it sink in for just a moment our lives would be transformed. Whatever 2009 has brought, God has been with me through it; whatever 2010 brings, he will be there too. He is never very far from me, and he is closest to me at mass. Christmas may come but once a year, but its magic lasts from day to day. God's presence never leaves us, his choice to live among us is irrevocable: every mass is Christmas Day, and every altar is Bethlehem.

It is all too easy to take this for granted, to become so accustomed to it that we lose sight of just how wonderful it is; that is why we celebrate this feast, rejoicing as men do in harvest. We tell again the story so that we can be infected once again with the wonder of it all. God's word for us this Christmas Day is 'You never need be alone again, I am with you'. If you will make a place for him in your heart, if you will visit him there each day to nurture and to care for him; if you will sit with him, and waste time with him, and love him, and let him love you, then all will indeed be well. We left our homes to come here today, but standing at the crib we have the strange feeling that actually *this* is our home, and always will be. Here we feel at peace, here we feel at rest, here we feel that all is well, and that is because the Lord is close. And the crib, which is our home, feels rather like a window onto Heaven, where each of us hopes that finally and for ever all will indeed be well.

To an open house in the evening  
Home shall men come,  
To an older place than Eden  
And a taller town than Rome.  
To the end of the way of the wandering star,  
To the things that cannot be and that are,  
To the place where God was homeless  
And all men are at home.

*From The House of Christmas, by G K Chesterton.*