

‘Christmas is coming and the goose is getting fat – let’s put a penny in the old man’s hat.’ So runs the old nursery rhyme. At this stage the goose, or whatever graced our Christmas table, is long since picked bare and there are few enough pennies to put in to anyone’s hat.

The post Christmas days of my childhood were days of picking over the Christmas dinner as Mum tried varied ways to use up the last of the turkey – turkey sandwiches, salads, curries – the carcass boiled for soup. Then there was the sitting around the fire, cracking Brazil nuts, watching old films on the TV, eating the selection boxes and other treats that had filled out the Christmas stocking. There was, if you like, a continuing savouring of the feast that we had enjoyed on Christmas Day. Here in Church these Sundays after Christmas represent an opportunity to continue to savour the gift we celebrate at Christmas, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This year I have found myself continuing to savour the title Emmanuel, God with us. While I have always loved that opening chapter of John’s Gospel, I found a particular resonance this year as I continued to savour that word Emmanuel.

In both our communions over Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and this morning we have heard those words:

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

On Christmas morning in the Family Service we reflected on:

⁴What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Then in today’s Gospel reading:

¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

There is something extraordinarily ordinary in the whole idea of Incarnation, of God present among us; expressed in a delightful simplicity by the late Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, one of the early giants in the struggle against apartheid, in words we have returned to a number of times over the Christmas season.

‘The Christian Faith’, he argues, ‘is based on an infinite respect for human dignity and human rights because of the fact that God himself has taken human nature and therefore endowed it with an infinite purpose and meaning which transcend the barriers of colour, race and creed.’

As we were thinking on Christmas Eve, that is a statement not only about my status but also the status of the other, the one with whom I will meet in my home and beyond, with friend and with stranger, the insider and the outsider. I think of not just encountering God in the other but also to what extent do I allow the other to encounter God in me, to what extent am I willing, in my own life, to be a sign of God’s living presence, to make God present in the world in which I live and move and have my being.

We contemplate this idea of encountering God in others, others encountering God in me in the context of the harsh realities of a new year. Whatever stage in life we are at, this year is going to be crucial. As individuals, as families, we each face our own challenges. For some they will be the ordinary, yet nonetheless vital, challenges of new school, getting married, having children. For many there is the additional uncertainty of our employment, paying the mortgage, school and university fees. As a society this coming year is crucial as we wonder what else, what extra sacrifices are going to be necessary for us to come through this crisis and at what expense in terms of our care for the weak and the marginalised. As I remarked last Sunday, we are facing into two crucial elections, to Dail Eireann and to the Presidency. The results of each of these elections will in their own way say a great deal about how we see ourselves. Do we retreat back into sectional politics, each sector of society seeking to preserve its own interests, or seek the greater good of our whole society? Are we going to choose leaders, choose a President, who will inspire, who

will speak the word of truth, albeit an uncomfortable truth, who will have a vision for our society at this particular time.

These are all serious issues but they need not be a source of despair. As I remarked on Christmas morning, it is easy to get sucked into hopelessness. The writer of the Fourth Gospel, as he speaks of the Word becoming flesh, expresses a fundamental optimism as he declares:

⁴What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. God present in the world, as I worry over employment, over home, over my children. I face none of these situations alone. This point is brought out in a poem that was used by the late King George 6th :

At the Gate of the Year

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'
And he replied,
'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!'

So I went forth and finding the Hand of God
Trode gladly into the night
He led me towards the hills
And the breaking of day in the lone east.

So heart be still!
What need our human life to know
If God hath comprehension?
In all the dizzy strife of things
Both high and low,
God hideth his intention."

by Minnie Louise Harkins 1875-1957
Included in King George VI broadcast 1939

How do we see that hand? Is that a hand that will drag us kicking and screaming where we do not want to go – or is it the hand of the one who promised he would be with always, to the very end of time.

This ‘better than light and safer than any known way’ leads me to think of the generosity of God’s provision. Our Gospel writer declares:

¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

That word ‘fullness’, a translation of the Greek word *pleroma*, occurs over and over again in the New Testament, and denotes a generosity of God’s provision that makes up for all shortcomings – the fullness of Christ, the fullness of time, the fullness of God. There is nothing lacking in God’s gracious provision. God grant us the grace to lay hold of it at this time. We have celebrated the coming of Emmanuel, ‘God with us’; he, who in the midst of the storm, said, ‘Peace, be still.’; who walked the road to Emmaus, speaking to the fears and disillusionment of dispirited followers; who stood in the midst of his disciples, showing them his hands and his side and greeting them, ‘Peace be with you’.

May we know his presence alongside us in whatever lies ahead in this coming year.

Collect of 2nd Sunday of Christmas

Almighty God,
in the birth of your Son
you have poured on us the new light of your incarnate Word,
and shown us the fullness of your love:
help us to walk in his light and dwell in his love
that we may know the fullness of his joy;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.