

...Ten days ago, as I do every year at this time, I travelled into the Focus Ireland café on Eustace Street, on the edge of Temple Bar to hand over the gifts you gave to Focus Ireland. As I remarked at the 9:30 last Sunday, I always find this a very humbling experience. There is the gratitude of the staff for our modest offering. Then there are the stories of those they meet in the café and out on the streets. That place is a symbol of hope and care ever more necessary in our straightened times. For me it is also a very hopeful sign that fundamental values of care and compassion that marked Irish society were not entirely swamped by the Celtic Tiger. That place is also a sign of God's presence in our society. Those who work there may or may not have a specifically Christian commitment but they are definitely channels of God's love and care.

When I came home, I picked up a book from my bookshelves that I had not read for some time. It is a book of some of the writings and sermons of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, from the early 1980's, 'Crying in the Wilderness'. It is a book of sadness, anger, passion, hope as he reflects on the society within which he grew up, within which he worked as Bishop, making his prophetic call for peaceful change in South Africa. The foreword to the book is written by Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, who was himself a champion for the people of his Parish of Sophiatown, a township on the edge of Johannesburg and who was subsequently expelled from South Africa. In the foreword he identifies what lay at the heart of Desmond Tutu's philosophy:

(Desmond Tutu) expresses that essential truth about the Christian Faith: that it 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. *Trevor Huddleston in foreword to 'Crying in the Wilderness'*

Desmond Tutu enlarges on this in a sermon preached in Johannesburg Cathedral:

The God whom we worship is wonderfully transcendent – St John in his Gospel sums it all up by saying 'God is Spirit'. Yet when this God wanted to intervene decisively in the affairs of man, he did not come as a spiritual being. He did not come as an angel. No, he became a human being. He came in a really human and physical way – his mother became pregnant, and he was born a helpless baby, depending on mother and father for protection, for food, for love and teaching. When they looked for him in the houses of the kings

and the high and mighty, he was born in a stable, as one of the lowly and despised. He worked as a village carpenter, knowing what it meant for his mother to lose a coin, to sweep out the house diligently by candle light until she found the lost coin and rejoiced at the finding.

Desmond Tutu in 'Crying in the Wilderness'

One of the names given to the infant to be born in Bethlehem that we read in Isaiah is 'Emmanuel', God with us. Matthew's Gospel begins with the designation of Jesus as Emmanuel. The closing words of the Gospel are a promise of continuing presence, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

At the heart of the Christian tradition is this idea of God present in the world of today. The writings of Desmond Tutu and others encourage me to think beyond the immediate. Earlier I spoke of Focus Ireland as a place of God's presence in the world of today, a very hopeful sign that the fundamental values of care and compassion that marked Irish society had not been swamped by the Celtic Tiger. All this emphasises for me the importance of recognising God's presence not just as we gather for worship, read and reflect on the scriptures but present also in the ordinary, in the ordinariness of family life, in the meetings in the shop, the sports club, the office; present also in the weak and the marginalised, in those uncomfortable encounters with the seller of 'The Big Issue', the cup held out for our loose change as we hurry down the street.

This Christmas, as the Celtic Tiger has very definitely padded off into the distance, and even in the harsh weather conditions that we have experienced of late, is a time to reaffirm who we are, as ones made in the image of God, as ones to whom God himself has come in the person of Jesus, as ones called to show Christ to the world in which we live. In our affluence we too often define others, allow others to define us, by what we have, the clothes we wear, the car we drive, the house we live in. In the words I quoted from Trevor Huddleston earlier, Christmas reminds us 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.

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.

This whole spread of the Incarnation is brought out in the words of a hymn by Graham Kendrick, as he reflects on the self giving, self emptying love of God and our vocation, as ones beloved of God, to show that love in the world of today

- 1 From heav'n you came, helpless babe,
entered our world, your glory veiled;
not to be served but to serve,
and give your life that we might live.

*This is our God, the Servant King,
he calls us now to follow him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*

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- 4 So let us learn how to serve,
and in our lives enthrone him;
each other's needs to prefer,
for it is Christ we're serving.

Graham Kendrick, Hymn 219 (Church of Ireland Hymn Book (5th edition))

May the Christ whose birth we celebrate be welcomed into the hearts and homes of our community and through us may his love be known in the world of today.