

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Zoom Lens

That's the effect of the Fourth Sunday of Advent. We began the season with the great apocalyptic view of the menaced earth with its nations in agony, *bewildered by the roaring of the ocean and its waves*; then we heard of the earth-moving way of the Lord through the desert, and on the third Sunday we read of the consolation of Jerusalem, the joy of God over his people. Now we hear the name of Bethlehem. We find ourselves rising with Mary, who is carrying more than an angel's message as she hurries across the hills to Elizabeth. This brings down the vastnesses of the holy Scriptures to a familiar scope: a young woman moving purposefully through the Holy Land, her mind alive with wonders as she travels.

Here I am! I am coming to do your will

We can accompany Mary in more than our imagination as she goes. We have read the story of the making and redemption of the world, we have a sense of the greatness of our religious landscape. The awe and scale of it has inspired us for centuries. But God does not invite us simply to *stand on the heights* or to *count the number of the stars*. He himself does not *thunder from the heavens*, or manifest himself *in the whirlwind and the fire*. "He came al so stil, where his moder was, As dew in Aprille, that faeth on the gras." The coming of God into the world was *completely* accomplished in a most intimate place: a hidden birth in a far province was his quiet entrance into human history. In this swaddled bundle protected by a human mother, God lay at rest surrounded by the work of his hands. *Everything was here, all human suffering, all human hope*. The eyes of the animals at the crib look on without comprehending the mystery that releases them from their slavery. These simple surroundings are the heart of the world at Christmas, and it is over this humility that the hosts of the heavens raise their canticle.

The remnant of his brothers

The shepherds on the hillside have always intrigued me. I've always wanted to work into their midst the little figure of David, who was fetched in from the very same sheepfolds to be anointed by Samuel; the youngest of his family, he is yet the one who will be the great

King. There is a moment, when we are born, when each one of us is the youngest member of the human race; and on the first Christmas night God himself holds that distinction (if only for the fraction of a second). This is the real wonder of the Incarnation: *eternity contracted to a span*, God's Son becoming the youngest of all and the least of all, so that from this littleness he may unfold in our flesh the fulness of the Godhead. There is no heir of David to pay him homage at his birth: no crowned head will bow, no anointed hands will wrap him in his messianic purple. Instead, Luke calls in the shepherds, disinherited, unconscious heirs of David, to see the state of the Christ. For this you need a zoom lens, not a wide angle. The whole truth is in the detail, the fulness of him who fills all creation is in the tiniest of the children of men.

This is my body, given for you

A Happy Christmas is to share this journey. Our eyes are not dazzled by angelic light, but we have heard the message, and we will come down to the place where he has chosen to lay his head, and recognise our Master as he comes into our world. This is the simplicity and glory of the great feast in one place, in one small form. Wherever we are in our following of him, may this feast bless us with its imperishable hope and consolation.
Fr Philip