

Christmas in School

Staff Service Homily

Our faith isn't a force for stability. It is, and always has been, the place of liberation. Liberation doesn't keep things as they are: it dissolves them and sends them into newness. So the invitation from God which begins its story isn't an invitation to contemplate the changeless eternity of the Most High. It's an invitation to

leave this country and your father's house for a place I will show you

and the early patriarchs of our faith have in common that they are all nomads and wanderers, and the central figure of our faith says of himself that

the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

This is all very unsettling. But think about it. The central celebration of Judaism remains, not a mighty Temple ceremony with a clear beginning, middle, and end, but the gathering of people with their coats on, hurriedly eating a half-cooked meal in houses they are about to abandon, in the name of a terrifying pilgrimage into the desert, a hard and (humanly-speaking) ill-provided expedition with an unknown terminus.

It will surely come as a surprise to most people that this precise instability should be the keynote of the Mass which is *our* religious heart. The bread is broken, and the cup passed by hands that will soon be nailed to the tree, and then abandoned in a borrowed tomb. A tomb's a form of stability, but not one around which we can build our lives!

Should this note of the provisional be the keynote of our celebration of Christmas, and of our understanding of our mission in Lincoln? Honestly, I feel extremely windy about the future at the moment. I'm not seeing children in Church. That speaks volumes, not just about the youngsters, but about their parents too. You know as I do that many of the lives gathered in our school are not being lived in the settled and traditional way we would instinctively like. So many children are coping with broken families, having lost a parent - or even both parents - and few of them are aware of their faith in any way which speaks to their real experience. I feel how extremely vulnerable they are to the pagan world around them, with its materialism, its self-obsession, and its superstition. Yes, there's a massive separation between them and their Church.

But if we are religiously-speaking on the skids, should we be surprised? The separation between the young and their Church perfectly matches the religious fact we call *original sin*, the separation between us and God. If most priests feel that they are addressing a world which has very few religious handles to it, and which is divided and unshepherded as never before, then aren't we being invited to proclaim and to evangelise, as in the beginning? The Cardinal spoke this year of a country called Britain where Christianity as the background to most people's lives is extinct. If it's true, let's face it; we only have one world to live in, and that's the real world.

But the feast of Christmas speaks of a birth - into just such a hostile and changing world - of a child who is God. He didn't come as a theory, or a programme, or a system, but as a child; and this whole child is God, a fact amongst all the other facts: *verbum caro factum est*: the Word became fleshly fact. That, at least, stops us in our tracks and, if we believe it, brings us to our knees. His shockingly vulnerable life is *life lived to the full* because his humanity is filled with the utter fulness of God, and that's the only state in which our lives can find their true fulfilment. So this solid fact of the incarnation doesn't bring *stability* to our human experience. Quite the opposite. Inheriting that divine life, that sharing in God's life, demands the willingness to move: life is change, perfection demands total change. Christianity doesn't give you permission to stay the same, where you are. *Leave this place, and go to a place which I will show you* is still the message. The nomadic reality of the flock, travelling with its shepherd is still the message. The laying-down of the shepherd's life for the love of the sheep is the essential part of the message. It is what the love of the flock demands; and a flock that does not have a shepherd like that is like a family that doesn't have parents.

What does this sharing in God's life mean for us? If I could offer you a Christmas present, it would be to give you the noble name of Good Shepherds. Your task in a school goes far beyond the formal rôle expressed in the contract with the governors. They'll pay you for doing that. But if you want to live your life to the full, it will be by laying it down for the flock, and for each of its members, especially the ones that are lost. That's what will rattle the windows of this place, what will turn it from a decent school into a birthplace, a springboard for the awesome pilgrimage which goes all the way to the terminus. And if we have some poor children who have lost their parents, we must find healing and love for them. If the world around them is lying to them and making them false promises, and leading them into danger, they must find somewhere the voice that they can trust, the voice of the true shepherd. I'm not sure they've quite heard it yet. Jesus says: *they will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him: they do not recognise the voice of strangers*. If our children are running away from us, it may be because we have yet to show them, in the precise terms of their need, the selflessness which speaks to them of true and selfless love.

All of us who aspire to be shepherds have a clear rôle in the drama of Christmas: it is for us to come down from the pastures, to find the place where Israel is fed, the manger of God; to come in humility, and find the God who is wrapped in the swaddling of our own weakness, and to let our hearts be turned from their fragile earthly security, or their blind complacency, or their pretended competence, or their post-modern self-obsession, and to receive a living child that is God. That can transform Christmas. It might even transform that unmentionable reality, the first day of next term.