

Our celebration of the Christmas coming of Christ is amplified in a special way by this first Sunday after the great feast, when we remember that Jesus comes into a family.

The DNA of the Son of God is a mysterious area into which I do not feel qualified to trespass. Maybe one day we shall all have access to one another's genetic makeup in ways more precise than the friendly desire to meet the parents and siblings of the one we love. For now, I'd rather do things the old way, and proceed from meeting and listening and watching.

Since Christmas John's first letter has been read to us at morning Mass. In it he once more speaks about the Word who has been made flesh. This is how he begins:

Something which has existed since the beginning,
which we have heard,
which we have seen with our own eyes,
which we have watched and touched with our own hands,
the Word of life - this is our theme.
² That life was made visible;
we saw it and are giving our testimony,
declaring to you the eternal life,
which was present to the Father and has been revealed to us.

I love to think of the beloved Disciple who wrote these words, who had a relationship with Jesus that was so close; he is meditating with us on the experience he had of the Son of God, because he knows that his experience is significant not just for himself but for all those Jesus came to save. For all that, he still refers to himself quite unashamedly as

The disciple Jesus loved.

We often tend to surround Jesus with an air of unreality. He took our flesh, and became what we are, in the most awesome act of abandonment. We respond most ungraciously by sending him back to heaven unmet, ungreeter, unwelcomed. We can't wait to invest him with supernal power and glory. We will not come to his birth and stay there, letting the mystery deepen in us. He came to be a baby, and we want to assure ourselves of his divinity from the beginning. I think the feast of the Holy Family is a time to put this right, and to let the bustle and obsession of a new baby clothe him with the significance such persons always command. Let his humanity be enough for us for a while, so that we can firmly lay hold on his flesh, can not only see him, but watch him, and hear him, and touch him with our hands as the Beloved Disciple remembers that he did.

Another of the themes the Church has meditated on since Christmas has been the death of martyrs, even of martyred babies. In the readings for St Thomas of Canterbury we heard that

Anyone who tries to live in devotion to Christ is certain to be attacked.

In the Gospel today we find the eternal meaning of the child breaking into the calm of his human family. Because of the hatred which is offered to all who love, Jesus himself becomes a refugee and a victim in his infancy. The hatred of Herod proceeds from his fear of revolt and deposition. It is entirely true to life: the historical Herod slaughtered all his own sons in one dreadful night because he sensed they were plotting against him. The Church is telling us something vital about our own families. They are schools of love, and although that may sound unbearably cosy and unreal, the truth is far less so. If our families are above all the place where we invest our hearts and seek for love, then they will be the places where we shall most certainly be attacked by the contrary forces. It is no urban myth that Christmas - the time when families try to gather, even if they stay separated for the rest of the time - are the times when there is most strife, domestic sorrow, even violence; it is the busiest time for

the Samaritans, and for the police, and for the Accident and Emergency departments in the hospitals. The family festival has blood on the floor, and the Beloved Disciple knows that, because he saw blood and water flowing from the side of Jesus, and wanted to give his testimony to it down the ages.

Of all the ideas which make Christmas so rich a season for us, none is more powerful than the notion of the Word of God, in whom lies hidden the meaning of the Creation, the secret of the love of God. It is said in John's letter that we *hear* him: but also that we *see* him with our own eyes - and as if arrested, we *watch* him - and that we *touch* him with our hands. There are many means of communication here, and the clear knowledge that to meet and welcome another person is to enter into a long journey into mystery; the Beloved Disciple knows this better than all the others. The necessary corollary follows: that he will be heard with contempt, and have hands laid on him to arrest him, and seen with hatred as he carries his cross, and watched when they strip him of his garments to be crucified.

I would ask you to meditate on the fact that the Word of God, in whom lay all this divine mystery, permits himself to be taken in the arms of a human mother and father, and to be *taught how to speak* as we do. In their lessons they would have to alert him to every scintilla of his own mystery, and the mystery of his Father in heaven. He would respond with the utter openness of a child unhampered by the genetics of evil. But see the extraordinary daring of the deed, by which the Father gives him to a human family with the fulness of trust: he comes, full of grace and truth, so that we may see his glory. In this moment, the human family is exalted beyond its own power to dream: a school of love, in which for a moment the youngest pupil on the earth was the Son of God incarnate.