

University Carol Service

Short Homily

I want to wish you a good feast, and to invite you to lay aside the labours of another term. Does that seem ridiculous? I sense that Christmas is beginning to be a time of dread - the hardest work of the year. I think this is a great pity: it means we're forgetting how to have a proper feast.

Once upon a time, before the reformation spoiled everything, there was a whole hierarchy of reasons not to work, delivered to us by the kindly hand of mother Church. Compare the public holidays enjoyed by modern Italians with the miserable list we manage in this country, you'll still see a remarkable difference. Here, increasingly, there is only one feast left - Christmas: the only day when Sainsbury's would be ashamed to open. On that day, we will rejoice and be glad. To that end, we'll put up lights and shower on those we love gifts beyond the dreams of avarice, and every one of us will push through the aisles of the supermarket a food barrow laden like Cleopatra's barge. Where does it all go? Certainly it couldn't all be *eaten* without a massive breakdown of the National Health Service. I'd love to be a rat on Boxing Day! They think it's Christmas!

There's a vague feeling that at Christmas we are on trial. There's a moral duty to live for a few days in splendour, with every desire gratified. When I was young, and margarine was still rationed, there was some sense in all this. People saved up all year to be able to afford it: briefly to visit the land of plenty. But now that the nation's children are 40% clinically obese, and no-one can answer when you ask, *What would you like for Christmas*, we have reached a cul-de-sac in a particular quest for happiness. I guess the point is that the *symbols* of rejoicing - the decorations and the presents and the food - are being asked to make the joy happen. A sad and expensive mistake!

At a carol service we try to revisit the true reason for joy. We remember that it can't be bought, that it is a miraculous gift, a grace from God. We remember the truth about our nature: that happiness can't be earned, that all our frantic engineering of security and wealth and power is hollow and pointless if we lack the one vital gift that makes life worth living: to be loved for our true selves, and to have the privilege of loving in return. The temptation in this season is to forget this truth, to attempt to wrench the world round to yield us our heart's desire.

That's what we sense in the manic anxiety of the shops and the media, the endless adverts, the endless ideas for creating new sensations.

We really must find the time to cleanse ourselves of all that, to enter a quiet place where there is no pressure, to find the peaceful gaze of God resting on us, pouring into our lives his eternal and unqualified love for us. That is the gift which Christmas celebrates.

That God enters the world as a new child is vital. It displays for us the truth that our hope is truly human, that in redeeming us God does not want to lose what we are, to backtrack on our nature. His plans for us are peace, and not disaster; his gift of life will not be withdrawn. In the working limbs, the beating heart, the warm breath of a new child, God comes close to us at last, and henceforth humanity will never be lost: it is in the heart of the Godhead. Every one of us must make this truth into a deep-set fountain of true hope which springs up indomitably within us. There is joy for all the world, there is eternal joy for you. Have a happy Christmas.