

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS 2020 ST CHAD'S CATHEDRAL

Here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

I remember beginning my homily at the Christmas Midnight Mass of 2019 with the same quotation from St Luke's Gospel. Little did we know the kind of year that would unfold ahead of us then – or how much we would need the presence of the Word made flesh to help us live with all the many absences this year has brought.

One of the hardest restrictions this Christmas is the impossibility of being with everybody we would want to greet or to spend some time with, especially our families and our friends. This heightens our sympathy for all those who have been unable, until very recently, to visit their elderly relatives in nursing homes or family members in hospital.

It also strengthens our prayers this Christmas for all those who have lost their relatives and friends, because of the coronavirus or other illnesses. They need to know that we are close to them in this Mass and in the prayers we offer for their intentions – and that their loved ones are still present to them, not only in memories but above all through their communion in Christ.

Many things serve to bring a person's presence to life in our daily lives. The Christmas cards that we have been receiving are a sign of the closeness that exists between us and others, even though they cannot be physically near to us. The photographs that we cherish, whether framed or on our phones, are a sign of someone's presence that overcomes the barriers of distance or time that lie between us.

In our Christmas Mass we use many beautiful signs that all point in the same direction – towards the child that is born for us. The musical settings of words that the Cathedral Choir are singing on our behalf tonight – these carols and anthems have the power to evoke a sense of the Christ-child in our midst.

The crib which is set before the altar this year is a very powerful sign of what lies at the heart of tonight's celebration. For although we regret the many absences of people and occasions that characterise Christmas this year, this great feast of the Incarnation and the Saviour's birth is about an astonishing presence in our lives and in our world.

Emmanuel is God-with-us. The crib is a sign of the extraordinary way that God chose to enter our world and to share our lives – in the birth of the child born to Mary. God's message couldn't be plainer: he so loved the world that he sent his only Son, born as one of us to redeem the world and to share with us the divine and eternal life for which we are destined – the everlasting presence of God.

When we are aware of God's presence it makes us behave differently to one another and to think differently about each other – seeing in others the image of Christ and therefore the presence of the living God. That is what inspires the wonderful team of people who have kept St Chad's Sanctuary here in Birmingham, or Brushstrokes in Smethwick and many similar charities open during the pandemic. They have also been a reliable presence to those in need.

You may know that I pray every day for the Canonisation of Blessed Dominic Barberi, the Passionist priest who worked in Staffordshire and who received St John Henry Newman into the Catholic Church at Littlemore. It has been a custom of the Passionist Order during their recreation for someone to interrupt their conversations every fifteen minutes with the words: the presence of God.

It must have been second nature to Blessed Dominic to look for and see God's presence in the world and the people around him. No wonder he recognised it in Cardinal Newman. And as a typical Italian he would have loved the crib scene, showing us God's incarnate presence in our midst.

The shepherds were told by the angel to look for the sign of *a baby...lying in a manger*. How amazing that the unimaginable greatness, beauty and goodness of God should choose to be present in the child who would live most of his life as a carpenter, hewing and shaping wood to make the kind of manger in which he was laid.

The crib reminds us of the hidden years of Jesus' life, growing up with his family, carving the yokes that he would ask us to carry, building the boats that carried Simon Peter and the fishermen he called, feeling the splinter that he asks us to remove from our own eye first, plaining the olive wood that yields the oil to make us glad.

It reminds us too of the three short years of his ministry. Our mind strays from the crib to the cross on whose wood he would die for our sins. All of these presences are with us in the crib, when we come to look inside with the shepherds and understand the sign of the *baby wrapped in swaddling clothes*.

Now we are about to celebrate the great sign of the Lord's real presence in the Eucharist, when bread and wine take on a new meaning as his body and blood. In this Christmas Mass all those we love are also present to us in him, the living and the faithful departed. The Eucharist is the pledge of eternal life when we shall be together in the Kingdom of God.

May Emmanuel - God-with-us - bring his blessings to you now and in the year to come. I wish you all a very happy Christmas!