

When a biographer sits down to write the life of a great person, the first problem is knowing where to begin. With the birth, with the parents, with the circumstances of the time or with a multitude of other possible starting points?

In the gospel we have just heard, John with those amazing words that echo the opening of Genesis takes us back to eternity itself. Jesus did not begin at Bethlehem. There never was a time when the Son was not with the Father. Before the solar system exploded out of space, Jesus was there. Before the continents emerged out of molten lava, Jesus was there. When the dinosaurs wandered the earth, Jesus was there.

As he comes into the world he brings gifts that only the Creator can bring and those are light and life. But he did more because as the gospel reminds us,

“He became flesh and dwelt among us”. God has visited his Creation in his Son who is one with him who became one of us, as the carol,” Hark, the herald angels sing” puts it,

“Veiled in flesh, the God head see,
Hail the incarnate deity
Pleased, as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel
Hark the herald angels sing
"Glory to the new born king"

Gabriel announced the wonder of the Incarnation to Mary; the heavenly hosts celebrated it in the sky above Bethlehem. But the angels are only messengers. The King has come and nothing can ever be the same again. This is what Christmas is all about; in the words of John Betjeman, “God was man in Palestine”.

The coming that divides history also divides people into those who believe and those who do not;

“¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own,^[c] and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”

Christmas is the great rescue mission of God to win back his world. We were helpless, lost and wandering so the living Word came among us bringing the gift of himself. So Christmas calls us to a life of faith and trust which has at its heart the great miracle that God comes to us in the person of Jesus.

So where does that place us today? Where is the light and life in our world?

Last Sunday, Pope Francis made his usual address in the Vatican to the gathered crowds in St Peter's Square, talking of Christmas, he said;

“On this day, Jesus, the Saviour is born of the Virgin Mary. The Crib makes us see the “sign” which God has given us: “a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (Lk 2:12). Like the shepherds of Bethlehem, may we too set out to see this sign, this event which is renewed yearly in the church.

Christmas is an event which is renewed in every family, parish and community which receives the love of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ..... With the shepherds, let us bow down before the Lamb, let us worship God's goodness made flesh, and let us allow tears of repentance to fill our eyes and cleanse our hearts.....

He alone, he alone can save us. Only God's mercy can free humanity from the many forms of evil, at times monstrous evil, which selfishness spawns in our midst. The grace of God can convert hearts and offer mankind a way out of humanly insoluble situations.....

Where God is born, hope is born. He brings hope. Where God is born, peace is born and where peace is born, there is no longer room for hatred and for war. Yet precisely where the incarnate Son of God came into the world, tensions and violence persist, and peace remains a gift to be implored and built. May Israelis and Palestinians resume direct dialogue and reach an agreement which will enable the two peoples to live together in harmony, ending a conflict which has long set them at odds, with grave repercussions for the entire region.

We pray to the Lord that the agreement reached in the United Nations may succeed in halting as quickly as possible the clash of arms in Syria and in remedying the extremely grave humanitarian situation of its suffering people. It is likewise urgent that the agreement on Libya be supported by all, so as to overcome the grave divisions and violence afflicting the country. May the attention of the international community be unanimously directed to ending the atrocities which in those countries, as well as in Iraq, Libya, Yemen and sub-Saharan Africa, even now reap numerous victims, cause immense suffering and do not even spare the historical and cultural traditions of entire peoples. My thoughts also turn to those affected by brutal acts of terrorism.....To our brothers and sisters who in many parts of the world are being persecuted for their faith, may the Child Jesus grant consolation and strength. They are our martyrs of today.

Where God is born, hope is born; and where hope is born, persons regain their dignity. Yet even today great numbers of men and woman are deprived of their human dignity and, like the child Jesus, suffer cold, poverty, and rejection. May our closeness today be felt by those who are most vulnerable, especially child soldiers, women who suffer violence, and the victims of human trafficking and the drug trade.

Nor may our encouragement be directed to all those fleeing extreme poverty or war, travelling all too often in inhumane conditions and not infrequently at the risk of their lives. May God repay all those, both individuals and states, who generously work to provide assistance and welcome to the numerous migrants and refugees, helping them to build a dignified future for themselves and for their dear ones, and to be integrated in the societies which receive them.

On this festal day may the Lord grant renewed hope to all those who lack employment – and they are so many; may he sustain the commitment of those with public responsibilities in political and economic life, that they may work to pursue the common good and to protect the dignity of every human life.

Where God is born, mercy flourishes. Mercy is the most precious gift which God gives us and we are called to discover that tender love of our heavenly Father for each of us. May the Lord enable prisoners in particular to experience his merciful love, which heals wounds and triumphs over evil.”

So said Pope Francis.

Light and life in their abundance is what Christmas is all about.

May light and life shine in your hearts, your homes and your lives this Christmastide.

I wish you all a very happy and blessed Christmas.

Amen.