

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

This is the last time we meet as a community before Christmas. It is the last opportunity for the Church, as a mother, to instruct our minds and hearts so that we will be beautifully ready and attentive to the special grace of Christmas. We need help to resist the pressure bearing in on us all from our consumer-driven society which is so focused on material gifts that the pressure can drive us away from our heart and from the peace that we really seek for ourselves and for those we especially love. We need help for our spirit to remain free to respond to the gift of tender love offered us by God at this time.

Christmas is a very tender time. It is true that Jesus reveals who God really is – and we are constantly amazed to see God in the vulnerable, welcoming and needy baby gazing up at us from the crib, inviting us to hold him in our arms and take him to our hearts. We may well ask with astonishment: ‘Can this be what God is really like?’ But for all that wonder, we must never lose sight of the fact that Jesus is also revealing to us who *we* really are. As a man he showed us what we are called to be, in his simplicity, in his ordinariness, in his courageous embracing of all it means to be human, and especially in his trust in God and love of others in all the circumstances of his life.

The most hardened heart can melt before the simple acceptance of love given by a new-born baby. A baby is totally needy, but it already has the potential to become a unique, creative, free and wonderfully loving human being. Life will direct the baby’s life force. Life will curb the baby’s life force. Life will wound the baby’s life force. But nothing can destroy the God-given grace that every child is, and, as Jesus showed us, nothing can separate any of us from the love of God shown us in the Heart of Jesus. When we adults speak of getting in touch with our heart, this is another way of referring to the innocent, creative mystery of the child still well and truly alive in us, however wounded by life. This is why Jesus said we would have to become like a little child again if we were to become part of the life into which he was inviting us. Christmas is a call back to the heart - the heart of what it is to be human.

The child Jesus reminds us that for all our desire to control and to be initiators of things, even of love, we are much more fundamentally people who need to receive love. We must surrender to love and open our arms like a child to be welcomed into the arms of God, even though this makes us vulnerable to much hurt in this confused world. Even when abused and crucified, Jesus kept his arms stretched out to embrace the world. His heart was pierced by the lance. This tore it open, only to allow to flow from it the fullness of his love. It can be so also for us.

We are always setting out on journeys, especially in our very mobile world. It is becoming increasingly hard for many even to have a permanent place in which memories can build up and which we can call a home. Christmas can be a sad time for this reason and for many other reasons. Christmas also reminds us that the most important journey is not the outward journey but the journey in to the heart, into that sacred place where we find and relate to ourselves and to others in finding and relating to God.

How might today’s readings help us to be attentive to this special grace? As usual the Responsorial Psalm provides the focus. It is a song of praise of God’s faithful love with a special eye to God’s faithfulness to king David. God promises: ‘I will keep my love for him always; I will

honour the promise I made him' (Psalm 89:30). The First Reading reminds of what that promise was. David was thinking of building a house for God. We all wonder what we should be doing for God. That is fine but we need to be reminded, as David was, that God is the creator, not us. God is the one building a house (a dynasty) for David. God is the Father, the Mother, who gives all to a child, and God's love, like that of a father or mother, is an unconditional love that nothing can break.

The house that David planned, and for which he prepared the materials, was in fact built by his son Solomon. We know it as the temple. In the inner sanctuary stood the Ark of the Covenant, which was a symbol of the throne of David. God made it his own throne. God made his presence known there. The mercy seat covering the Ark was the place where God dwelt among his people and where he revealed his face and declared his will. The Ark contained the word of God and was covered by the protective wings of the angelic cherubim. People travelled the length of the Holy Land to be in God's presence, or, as they expressed it, 'to see the face of God'. The Ark was veiled in mystery, seen only by the High Priest, but the people knew it was there and so they knew God had not abandoned them, and that God's reign was supporting the reign of the Davidic king. This was their security.

What is our symbol? Where do we go to see God's face? Where is our Ark of the Covenant? The answer is given us in the Gospel. We go, not to the imposing edifice of a temple, however beautiful. We go to an ordinary humble home, the home at Nazareth – anybody's home, our own home. We go, not to the high priest, however sacred his role. We go to a young girl who has just become a woman, ready for love. She is open to the most wonderful love that anyone can be offered – and it is offered to us all – the love of the God who imagined us into being and continues to create us from within. It was not a man who came down upon her. It was the creative power of God himself. The angel hovering above her is called Gabriel - a name which signifies the power of God, the power of love. She opened her arms to welcome the embrace of the author of all life, and such was the intimacy and mystery of this love-giving – a love-communion which is offered to us all – that God's own Word was made flesh within her. Under the protective wings of the powerful angelic figure, and with God's Word deep within her womb, Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant.

She is a symbol for us of God's commitment to the human race. Every single human being, every man woman or child in this church, is called to bear God's word within, and to carry Christ prayerfully and gently wherever we walk. Everyone is called to bring forth Christ into this world through our words and actions, and, of course, through the quality of our loving.

This is the grace of Christmas. That beautiful child who we once were is still well and truly alive, however hurt, however distracted, however injured by the sin of others or by our own sin. It is our humanity that binds us all together in one human family. Of course our humanity is very imperfect. Don't you think God knows that? It is this real human condition that God embraced in the Incarnation. Let us embrace each other's mystery, and let us embrace our own. Only love can heal us and all God's love is available precisely for that. God loves us and nothing can separate us from that. God will be faithful to the promises he made us as he was faithful to David. We are each called to be an Ark of the Covenant – a sacred place, made holy by God's presence.

Let us respect this sacred place especially in our children, and by our reverence for them let us teach them what a sacred place they really are. It is this that supplies the real boundaries that direct the stream of their life, not boundaries imposed artificially for the convenience of others. As we reverence our children, we are reminded that we are all children, children of God, and so, mindful of our own ordinariness and imperfections, let us be gentle with each other, so that our love, like Gabriel's words to Mary, will awaken others to the intimate invitation offered each of us by God to be bearers of his Word. Each of us in our own way are encouraged by Mary to say Yes to Love, as the mystery of our lives unfolds in all its simple wonder.