

## **THERE IS ALWAYS ENOUGH**

### **Portadown Carol Service (17 December 2010)**

There is always enough. I wonder about that! Christmas has crept up on us again and with just over a week to go, and being hampered with snow, there are not enough days or hours for all the shopping and preparations to be done, not enough parking spaces at Rushmere, not enough money, not enough time for phone calls and visits; and for many well meaning Christians, no time for Carol Services! Advent and Christmas time seems to magnify or illuminate a reality about modern day living – there is just not enough time in general, not enough hours in the day, not enough days in the week. Not enough money to feed our modern style of living. It is no wonder that there is a correlation between how we live our lives today and the amount of stress treated by doctors. Modern living is often not healthy living, and Christmas time reminds us of that.

I'm familiar with the effects of stress myself. A few years ago I suffered burnout; life and ministry had become so hectic that I realised I had two options – either a break or a breakdown. I chose the break! My bishop gave me three months off and I spent the first four weeks at Worth Abbey, a Benedictine Abbey in West Sussex which featured in the TV programme *The Monastery* and more recently *The Big Silence*. I was there only a few days when I met with the abbot, Fr Christopher Jamison. I spoke to him about my busyness, my not having enough time for myself, the demands of parishioners, how this has led me to question what life was all about, and more seriously to question my vocation. After I had finished pouring out my story the abbot looked at me and said five words, 'Father your problem is sloth'. I could have hit him. What an insult. I thought...was he really listening to me... But he went on to talk about a particular form of sloth – what the ancient desert hermits and monks called *acedia* – or spiritual carelessness. My problem, according to Fr Jamison, was that I had become so busy I had neglected my spiritual life; I had become slothful about my relationship with God. I was spending all my time working for the Lord but forgetting to spend time with the Lord of the work. The solution was simple, the abbot told me – get up one hour earlier every morning and pray. That simple wisdom changed my life.

The more I share my story of *acedia* with others the more I hear: 'That is my problem as well.' It seems to me that western society is suffering from a widespread form of *acedia* – life is lived at such a hectic rate that there is no room for the spiritual; indeed for many, religion has lost its relevance. And the reality is that such a lifestyle without God, without

attention to the spiritual, is never enough – we will always crave more and more will never be enough.

Christmas draws attention to the busyness or collective acedia of life, and it challenges it. The crib draws us into a different reality about life, it invites us to live life differently. Instead of busyness and hectic rush we meet stillness and wonder at the crib. In place of the material and wealth and hoarding, we find simplicity. Instead of anger and retaliation and ego we find love and are drawn to a spirituality of empathy towards the needy, and goodwill to all. As we gaze at the baby who is Emmanuel, we realise our deep down, instinctive need of God and his of us, and somehow the frenetic pace at which we live life seems so false.

Christmas puts us in touch with what life is really about. Instinctively, as we gaze at God made human and small we appreciate that there is always enough. Or in the words of St Ignatius of Loyola, God's love and grace are enough for me. It is our relationship with Christ, formed by prayer and reading the scriptures which transforms our lives and is enough for us. When God is enough for us then we will always have enough – enough forgiveness, enough goodwill and empathy toward the needy, enough love, enough support when days are difficult, enough time for friends, enough.

Over the next week I invite you to visit the crib – in Church or on a Christmas card. Better still, close your eyes and in prayer go to the crib. Spend time there. St John says 'God is love', not that he loves but that he is entirely love. Experience that love during your times of stillness over these days. Realise more intensely that the birth of Jesus Christ in that stable in Bethlehem is where all your questions begin to be answered. If you want to look on the face of utter love, if you want to see what the lover will do for the beloved, take yourself with faith to the crib and look at the image of the child lying in the manger. His love is enough.

Recently I read the a story from "*The Whisper Test*" by Mary Ann Bird. It helped me realise a bit more deeply God's love for me. I hope it does that for you too.

*'I grew up knowing I was different and I hated it', writes the author 'I was born with a cleft palate, . . . a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth and garbled speech.*

*When schoolmates asked, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable*

*to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family would love me.*

*There was however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored – Mrs Leonard by name. . . . Annually we had a hearing test. Mrs Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something and we would have to repeat it back – things like “The sky is blue” or “Do you have new shoes?”*

*I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs Leonard said in her whisper “I wish you were my little girl.”*

“I wish you were my little girl.” In saying those words, Mrs Leonard gave this little girl the experience of being chosen, of being loved. It is really the story of the crib, the story of Christmas, the story of Emmanuel, God with us. God became human to show us we belong to him. From the manger the baby Jesus whispers to each of us, ‘you are my little girl, you are my little boy.’

My invitation to you this Christmas is to take time every day to nurture this relationship, to make it the priority of our lives. To constantly go to the crib and experience God’s love. It is not often realised, but a common theme of Benedict XVI’s pontificate has been the call to such a personal relationship with Christ. At his inaugural mass as pope he ended his homily with the following words:

‘Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to

him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.’

True life is to be found in opening the doors of the crib, allowing Christ to influence how we live each day. Speaking about doors, I am reminded of the picture in St Paul’s Cathedral in London painted in 1904 by William Homan Hunt called *The Light of the World*. In that picture, Jesus Christ is seen standing at a closed door. In one hand he carries a lamp and with the other he is knocking at the door. On the outside there is neither knob nor handle. The visitor can only enter if the person within opens the door from the inside. Jesus Christ does not force himself on us. That is why there is no handle on the outside of the door in that picture.

But Jesus Christ, Emmanuel is knocking all the time at your door and mine. Are we entirely free to say ‘Yes, come in?’ or do we refuse to react to that persistent knock? We have to have faith and confidence to open the door to let him into our lives. And when we open the door we see that he is carrying the lamp. He will be the light, a kindly light to guide us:

Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom.  
Lead Thou me on...Keep Thou my feet,  
I do not ask to see the distant scene,  
One step enough for me.

We do not see the distant scene. The future is hidden from us and we have to be content to take one step at a time. There is much to be worried about – economic recession, getting older, family and health problems, loneliness. How important it is to be aware of how modern living takes control of our lives. We need to go forward with confidence, with our hand in Christ’s hand. Let him into your life. Let him take you wherever he may lead you. He knows the way and carries the lamp. Indeed he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. With him there is always enough.

Martin McAlinden