

Christmas

25th December 2014

'A Light that darkness could not overpower'

I was struck by the front of the Christmas issue of the new-look *Catholic Herald* magazine — here it is ...



Surrounding the peaceful sight of the Holy Family in Bethlehem — a beacon of light — are images of the darker side of 2014: the kidnappings of 200 girls in Nigeria by Boko Haram; the atrocities committed in the name of the 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria, especially against Christian groups and ancient Christian churches; the aggression and tensions in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea; the repeated tragedies of drowned migrants in the Mediterranean trying to reach Lampedusa; the many deaths in West Africa from the Ebola virus; the devastating flooding in Pakistan. As well as these images, we might remember also the two crashed airliners, one of which has still not yet been located.

A friend of mine who works in television news said to me in the middle of this year that she'd had to stop listening to Radio4's 'Today' programme in the morning over breakfast. She had to have a break — it was getting too draining to be washed over with the tides of bleak news all day every day. It has certainly been a tough year. For me, the most moving tragedy was in April, the shooting

dead of the Dutch Jesuit priest, Fr Frans van der Lugt, who refused to leave the Syrian city of Homs even though almost all the Christians had either fled or been escorted out. He had given almost 50yrs of his life to working with the people of Syria, Christians and non-Christians alike. He would not abandon the people he had served for decades, despite the chances he had to be let out of the besieged city. He opened up what was happening in Homs to the world, simply by being there, by appealing online to men of goodwill. In the midst of the dark tragedy that has been the story of Iraq & Syria this year, this martyrdom of Jesuit Fr Frans shines out: not a life wasted or cruelly taken away, but a life given in sacrifice for the cause of peace, solidarity and cross-community friendship.

The other event which struck me to the core was in February, in the civil strife in the Central African Republic, where a Catholic priest and his parishioners offered the church itself to shelter their Muslim neighbours; opening up the sanctuary of their parish church to offer sanctuary to those at risk from militia reprisals. Fr Xavier Fagba risked

death threats to himself in doing this, yet had the courage to do this, and to convince his people to do this with him, in a very dangerous situation. Extending the hand of security and friendship to those in a dark place, they also allowed Christ's light to shine brightly.

So, in the same way, despite the sadnesses and dark events of 2014 worldwide, yet we can still come to the Christmas Crib and see its light shining out: God the Son, God the Light of the World, God the Prince of Peace, born for us, 'God with us.' Or, as St John says in the Prologue of his Gospel, "*a Light that darkness could not overpower*" (Jn 1:5). At Midnight Mass, we get this sense particularly, since we enter into a semi-dark church, whilst the Crib shines brightly before us. Nothing can dim the Light that Christ is. He comes into this world Himself, not to light it from afar, like a distant star, but to light it from close by, like a bright lamp lighting up each of our lives right here. God does not remain distant from our suffering; but indeed comes close, and suffers with us — and in doing so, he transfigures some of that suffering with the

most saintly heroism, deeds of holiness that we might not think we had in us were it not for faith and grace. Surely it was the glorious light of Christ Himself shining out of that priest as he was martyred for standing up, non-violently, to men of violence? And his is just one well-known case amongst many: thousands of Christians worldwide have suffered Christ-like martyrdom, oppression or displacement this year. They are shining as lights lighting up the world. They inspire me and help me in my faith. I rejoice that I share that faith in Christ that has given them such saintly heroism, fighting back the darkness simply with the armour of God's light.

As we go from this church today to celebrate Christmas in other lovely ways, let's make sure that we carry the light from the Crib, the light of Christ. Let us always and only ever treat others — family, friends, neighbours, strangers — the way Christ would have us treat them. Let us be beacons only of Christ's light. Let's not contribute at all to the darkness of sin, of aggression, of jealousy, of selfishness. Let's promise the Lord Jesus that

we will be close to Him this next year, so as to be filled with His light and grace. This is the only way that we can beat back the darkness, by being bearers of His Gospel. *“I am the Light of the World; whoever follows Me will not be walking in darkness but will have the Light of Life”* (Jn 8:12).