

Christmas

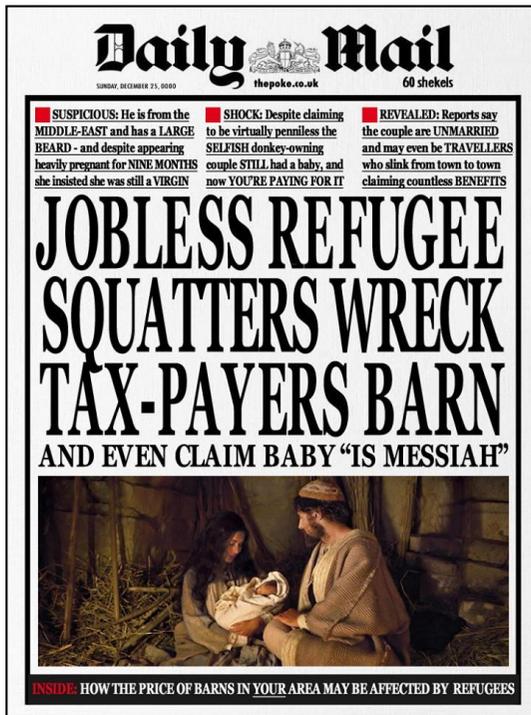
25<sup>th</sup> December 2015

'Christmas in the 'Year of Mercy''

It's always interesting to see what's in the news in these Christmas days, as we Christians come to celebrate the most newsworthy event of all time? I cast my eyes over the paper yesterday — there were valiant stories of charity, such as the people of Cumbria pulling together for Christmas after (and braced for more) floods. There was a touching story of a lady witnessing to the power of our Christmas traditions as she remembered her dying mother, afflicted with dementia, opening her eyes in simple recognition of the treble solo as 'Once in Royal David's City' started up on the radio. There was a story of bravery by a 3-yr-old girl who saved her pregnant Mum's life by successfully managing a long '999' phone conversation to the Ambulance service. And then ... well, then there was the story of a British couple getting their dead boxer dog cloned in South Korea for a mere £67,000! — Think of all the hungry people that could have fed! What a strange world we live in! What a world of mixed desires and actions: the most courageous and faithful; along with the

most selfish and violent.

It was into this world — the mash-up of human lives and human history — that the Son of God has chosen to come. Our Lord deliberately entered a world that was marred by sin; in fact, He knew that the sinful selfishness endemic in the world would play out even in His own earthly life. Starting from the word 'go,' He's reduced to the poverty of being laid, newborn, in the poverty of a hay-filled animal's trough. In a spoof newspaper front page I also saw yesterday, the news events of 1<sup>st</sup>-c. Palestine are reported thus: "Jobless Refugee Squatters Wreck Tax-Payers' Barn." It's a stark reminder that the Holy Family had the sort of Nativity that was a sharing in the worst that human life could throw at them. Jesus Christ was not in any way insulated from the barbarism and the cruelty of the world. And in a year when the tragic plight of so many refugees fleeing war and persecution in the Middle East has been much in our minds and politics, it's poignant to think that our Blessed Lord, and saints Mary & Joseph, also had their several experiences of being migrants and



refugees. Yet, we proclaim Christmas as the very beginning of the ‘Good News’! We proclaim in prayers, song, and in festive food, journeys to loved ones, and gift-giving, the joy of the occasion. Because despite the darkness, despite the sins, despite the inhumanity, yet there is now light, “a light that shines in the darkness” — “a light that darkness could not overpower.” The coming of the Son of God into the world, in human flesh, even in so weak and small a way as He chose to come, is a light that

will never go out. Jesus’s divine presence in the world — His message, His Church, His Sacraments — is the medicine that God wills to be the answer to the world’s ills. Despite everything: despite the ways in which we ignore Christ — whether in the day-to-day sins of unkindness to each other; whether in the atrocities of genocides and war-mongering of governments and terrorists — Jesus remains our hope; in fact our only hope. For without Christ there is no light at all; there is only darkness and despair, as humanity would have no meaning and purpose. For above all, Our Lord brings His love to the world: a love that is simple, unfussy, meek, and tolerant of the awful inconveniences that we put Him through. In other words, His love is cast upon us by way of mercy. When God’s love and mercy shine down upon the face of this sinful world, what it starts to look like is the poor, stable scene of a newborn helpless babe in a manger; what it goes on to look like is the bloody, execution scene of a strung-up helpless man on a Cross; and what it ends up looking like is a glorified scene of the risen Lord, restored

to us in beauty and majesty, God's love and mercy having conquered all that hatred.

In the 'Year of Mercy' which Pope Francis has called us to, over the next year, we want to deepen our appreciation of that divine, unconditional mercy that flows from the heart of the Father. Poured out upon humanity, excluding no-one other than those who choose themselves to reject it, God's mercy is abundant and ever-present. It saves us from our sins; it releases us from mediocrity and depression over what our life is; it protects and binds us against going down the path of selfishness and aggression that is the downward spiral of a life lived without God. Again and again we must gaze at the Crib and the Cross; again and again we must marvel that God did this — and He did this for us; ... He did it for *me*! And therefore it matters: it matters to me every day — so I pray to Him — and it matters every Sunday — so I adore and love Him in the Mass — and it matters that I live for others as He has clearly taught — and so I live with a love for my neighbour that is giving, sacrificial, ongoing, patient ...

On this happy morning, Christmas Day, we see the Christ-child, who is God most high, manifesting His incredible mercy towards us. We rejoice and we sing out in His praise today: but are we really going to live it? Are we actually going to let His gift of mercy and forgiveness change our ways? We must! If Christ cannot change *us*, then how can He change and heal the world *through* us? If we want the world to be filled with stories of goodness, selflessness and sacrifice, and not of horror and evil, then we need God's mercy in our hearts. May this Christmas in the 'Year of Mercy' be one in which we receive happily the gift of God's Son with profound and humble gratitude; and in response be determined to exercise that mercy to others in the coming year.

They say, don't they, that "A dog is not just for Christmas" — not even a cloned dog! — but more to the point, "Christmas is not just for Christmas"!