

Christmas

25th December 2016

‘What a Year!’

It’s tempting, as the year comes to its end, to look back over the past 12 months and wonder just what was going on in 2016! — political upsets, geo-political upsets, and rather a lot of terrorist atrocities, as well as the deaths of countless well-known figures of the entertainment world. It’s a year that has certainly been eventful, and which has created much strife — even warfare. And yet, at this season of peace and goodwill, as we enter into Christmas today, without turning our back on the world’s woes and worries, we are right to open our eyes to a greater picture than that which the daily news presents us.

This verse of the Christmas carol *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* I always find very moving:

**Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man at war with man hears not
The tidings which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife
And hear the angels sing!**

The news which we are invited to hear, then, in faith this Christmas is the hushed news of the angels, the “good news of great joy.” It’s sometimes hard to hear this good news when the din and clash of other news reverberates so noisily around us. But as believers today, just as much as Mary & Joseph, shepherds and Magi, at the first Christmas, we need to hear what the angels sing.

The first thing which the angels say to the flabbergasted shepherds on the hillside is: “**Fear not!**” It’s a refrain that echoes throughout Scripture when God speaks to man. “Fear not! ... I come not in anger or to give you dread, but I visit you with love and tenderness.” How much do we believe this? How deeply do we really believe in God as our lover and advocate, our devoted heavenly Father who is keen to keep us close, and not lost to Him? When God draws close to us, we should not shrink from Him in fear, but we should see a loving Father who cares most of all about our happiness and eternal destiny. Fear not! Do not draw back from the Lord, for everything He offers us — above all, His very Son, Jesus Christ — is given to us for

our good. Our life will be lived to the very best, for ourselves and also for others, when we live it in intimate closeness to God. A religious life, a devout, pious, prayerful, life, in conscious adherence to Jesus will always lead us away from our fears and towards greater peace, even in the face of the world's bad news! "Fear not," sing the angels ... "Fear not," they console us with. We must hear these simple, profound words from heaven. Fear not to love and serve God with all your heart!

What else do the angels sing as they proclaim the good news for all the people? "**A Saviour has been born to you.**" When God draws near to us in the Incarnation, in the coming of Son as man, He does not come for chastisement or merely to give instruction or to set an example. He comes as Saviour — in fact, as Redeemer! To imagine that Jesus comes only to give instruction or to set an example is to reduce Him merely to a good, even supremely good, man. But Jesus is not that. He is truly 'God made man,' 'God with us,' God coming amongst us to inhabit this same life as we do, to share in it, cleanse it of

sin, and offer humanity once again to the Father in perfect love — the sort of perfect love for which we were made. From the first moment He is born, He is not just a sweet, innocent child to be 'cooed over,' but the eternal Son of God, to be knelt before and adored. As the angel had previously announced to Joseph, "He is the one who is to save His people from their sins." His being amongst us is for the life-and-death battle for our souls: not for tinsel and snowmen and robins, but for what is really important, for our salvation! Only He can accomplish this; so, come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Finally, the angels' song includes the news that the new-born Son of God wasn't going to be found in any ordinary surroundings, but is "**a baby wrapped ... and lying in a manger.**" Along with the other aspects of this incredible message, this is also news that we mustn't fail to hear if we are to appreciate it as 'good news!' It is the littleness, the humility, of God's incarnate entry into this world — not born in luxury; not arriving with an almighty fanfare — that is almost the most surprising element of the news the angels

sang. Pope Francis drew attention to this ‘littleness’ the other day, when he spoke by telephone to the viewers of TG1 in Italy the other day to give his Christmas message. He said:

“I wish you a Christian Christmas, as the first was, when God wished to overturn the values of the world. He made Himself small in a stable, with little ones, with the poor, with the marginalized ... Littleness. In this world where the god ‘money’ is so adored, may Christmas help us to look at the littleness of this God who has overturned worldly values.”

Pope Francis reminds us forcefully, as He has been reminding us throughout his pontificate, that God Himself came amongst us in poverty, and so the last thing we are to strive for in this life is riches and luxury. God came as a helpless babe, born in the surrounding of the animal barn, placed in the hay of the feeding trough. In His littleness He accepted the love, care and protection of Mary and Joseph; and throughout His earthly ministry He would only ever live simply and without the trimmings. He is the loving God

who draws near to us in the flesh ... He is the Saviour who will die carrying the burden of our sins ... But He is also the paragon of humility and poverty, pointing out with incredible clarity that the human person is worth infinitely more than what one’s possessions or social status is worth.

As we come to celebrate Christmas, then, we must hear what the angels sing, and be reminded by their precious good news that we are here to care for each other, and especially for the poor. God’s human birth in a stable is good news: He is not urging us to better ourselves in terms of income and expenditure; but to use what we have been given to make better the lives of others. He relied on the devoted love and care of the married couple Mary & Joseph; we ought also to reach out in love to those in need around us. So, before you let Christmas pass you by for another year, reflect on what you have spent at this time; make sure that somewhere along the line you have benefitted a worthwhile charity that cares for people in real need, so that from us they also can hear the good news, the news the angels sang, and not be victims only of noise and strife.