



Christmas — 25th December 2019
'Of Cribs & Carols!'

I thought it would be ideal, in my Christmas homily, to speak of Pope Francis's lovely little letter to the Church, *Admirabile Signum*, released this month. In this letter he reflects on, and re-proposes to the Church, the image of the Christmas Crib, the Nativity scene, which since 1223AD, in the days of St Francis, has been a traditional part of Christmas. As I said, I thought Pope Francis's words in his letter were very beautiful, ... but someone got there first! Cardinal Vincent, in a Pastoral Letter to us for next Sunday, has stolen that theme already! I'll leave that to him, then!

Another tangible, and much-loved part of our traditional celebration is of course the singing of Christmas carols, those beautiful hymns and melodies that we use in this season to recount the events of Jesus's birth. Last night (tonight) at Midnight Mass, we manage(d) to fit in singing 11 of them, which is always a joy. These carols are so

poignant, as they connect us across the whole stretch of our lives to Christmases past — very special hymns, then, that we have sung since our youngest days. And they join us, too, with whole generations of Christians long gone: *Stille Nacht* ('Silent Night'), for example, originated in rural Austria, written by a parish priest for singing to guitar at Midnight Mass in 1818; *Adeste Fideles* ('O Come, All Ye Faithful'), dates back to the 1700s and to exiled English Catholics in France; the melancholy lullaby, *The Coventry Carol*, which reflects on the Slaughter of the Innocents, is older still, taking us back to Tudor England and the mediaeval mystery plays; and the carol 'In the Bleak Midwinter,' originates in Victorian England, and the devout Christian, Christina Rossetti — surely this carol is one of the greatest poems in the English language! (There was a lovely BBC programme the other day presented by H.C.P. curator Lucy Worsley which looked at the astonishing history of these and many other famous carols.)

But this nostalgia is not by any means the whole reason that carols really speak to the heart, I think. What

surely makes carols so special to us, and form an essential part of Christmas, is that each and every one of them is an attempt to put into human poetry the wonder of the mystery of God taking flesh in the Christ child. The accounts in Scripture are of course profound — the words of St Matthew’s and St Luke’s ‘infancy narratives,’ and St John’s majestic ‘Prologue’ going back to the Word of God “in the Beginning” — and we would never want to be without them, for they form the basis of much of our Advent and Christmas liturgy ... But it is also important to take the message conveyed to us by the Gospel writers and the Church down the ages, and make it our own — and surely that’s what the carols cause generations of Christian believers to do: to enter into the mystery, to make it real in their hearts, to ponder on the grandeur of God and His humility in entering His creation, and then to express those sentiments of faith in new and creative ways, in the words and music of Christian poetry and hymns and carols.

I’d like to share with you this Christmas Day (night) a few of my favourite lines from carols, and to use those

words to deepen our love for Jesus Christ our Lord as we celebrate His holy birth, and adore Him in His sacred humanity. I have, here, an exercise book that I’ve owned since I was a boy ... in which I wrote out as many carols as I knew, so that as a family we had all the words ready to sing after Christmas lunch. They’ve always touched me ...

1. The first, is from the late-Advent carol that we’ve been singing the last few days, ‘O Come O Come Emmanuel’ which expresses the longing of Israel for the Messiah to come. I love the line, “*O Come, O Come, Thou Lord of Might, who to Thy Tribes on Sinai’s height, in ancient times didst give the Law, in cloud and majesty and awe.*” This reminds us that Jesus who is to be born is one and the same majestic God who revealed Himself to Israel of old ... Emmanuel, ‘God with us,’ is the Creator God of all things, choosing to come and be with us in the flesh!
2. ‘What Child is This?’, sung to the famous old English melody of ‘Greensleeves’ is another favourite, and it meditates — as many carols & paintings do — on the

fact that the sweetness of this Nativity scene is tempered by looking ahead to the sufferings of Christ in His Passion: “*Nail, spear, shall pierce Him through, the Cross be borne for me, for you. Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the Babe, the Son of Mary.*” In other words, we cannot press pause and just wish that the joy of new birth could be the whole story! No, we also embrace Christ who died for our sins, for that shows the real depths of His love for us.

3. ‘Away in a Manger,’ though a very simple text, and one of the best-known carols of all, has that request that reaches across the generations, and across the centuries — “*Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay close by me for ever, and love me, I pray.*” We mustn’t approach Christmas, then, in a detached way that tries to view the Bethlehem scene from a safe distance! We must be asking that this same divine Lord come very near to us in the here and now. We can’t leave Him in the manger! — we must pick Him up and hold Him close as the very purpose of our life!

As we sing and pray these and other carols, and as we celebrate this holy Christmas (Midnight) Mass, we can use these words of Christian tradition to make sure that our hearts are set on Jesus, God made man. If our lives are *not* centred on Him, then life, which is always going to have its rocky times — its disappointments, illnesses, upsets — is going to catch us off guard and probably defeat us in our quest for any peace. If we centre our lives on the “heaven-born Prince of Peace,” however, then every little human sorrow is put in perspective, and the greater, and undefeated, divine joy offered to us, becomes our goal and our life’s stability. Christmas need not be complicated, or stressful, or expensive: it should be first and foremost a visit with the heart to the humble stable of the birth of Jesus, there to kneel and adore. As Christina Rossetti summed up, in the final v. of her famous carol, “*What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; yet, what I can, I give Him, give my heart.*” That’s all Jesus wants. Are we willing to give Him that, this Christmas, “give my heart”?