

Christmas

None of us have experienced a year like 2020. It is a year that many people may want to forget. There were a lot of things that we couldn't do this year. We were unable to travel for much of the year. We met online rather than face to face. We were unable to gather to celebrate the great feast of Easter. But here we are gathering in relatively great numbers to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

We have just heard the familiar account of Christ's birth as told by Luke. We could say that we have heard it all before. The story may not have changed. But we have. What is it about the story of Christ's birth that we are hearing differently this year because of who we are, because of what we have been through together in 2020

Perhaps we noticed that Mary and Joseph made the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem only because they were forced to make it? Did they have to make a declaration of where they had been as they crossed the border from Galilee to Judea? Did they line up for hours trying to get into the Bethlehem inn only to be told that there was no room for them there? Can we imagine how they felt when they were shunted off to a stable, even as Mary was about to give birth?

And who was there to support them when they were such a long way from home? Can we imagine how much Mary missed her family? In this year when many grandparents have not been able to see their grandchildren, perhaps we have thought for the first time about the grandparents of Jesus and how long they had to wait to see their grandson?

Perhaps we have seen the shepherds a little differently this year? They lived away from the rest of society as if they were in quarantine or self-isolation. And when they were told that they would find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes or bands of cloth perhaps we wondered where that cloth came from? When the shops were closed did someone find an old sheet and tear it up into strips to wrap around Jesus to keep him warm?

In this year when we have missed out on many things, we can more easily imagine some of the things that the Holy Family missed out on when Jesus was born. But Luke's gospel does not focus so much on those things. Luke wants us to focus on the good news that the birth of Jesus is for us and for all in our world. The shepherds are told not to be afraid because the angel brings them news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. And then the whole of creation begins to sing a song of joy.

A few days ago, Pope Francis greeted the Vatican employees and their families to thank them for their service in a difficult year and to remind them of their mission to proclaim the Good News of the birth of Jesus. He said, Christmas is a feast of joy "because Jesus is born for us". It calls us, to shake off "our torpor, boredom, apathy, disinterest and fear, especially in this time of the health emergency, in which it is difficult to find the enthusiasm of life and faith." We must imitate the shepherds who visited the Child Jesus, and like them: "Rediscover, Contemplate, and Proclaim."

It is important, he explained, to rediscover the birth of the Son of God as the greatest event in history: twenty centuries have passed and Jesus is more alive than ever! The Word became flesh and dwelt among us: this is the event that we must rediscover," he said. With their attitude of contemplation, the shepherds say: "We see this event which the Lord has made known to us" and we must meditate, contemplate, pray. And quoting from many examples in the Scriptures, Pope Francis invited those present to reflect on God's goodness and love, on what it means to become an adopted child of God through baptism, on the fact that God sent us his son to save us, so that "we might become heirs of eternal life in hope." "

Finally, faced with this reality, Pope Francis said, "we cannot refrain from proclaiming it." Here again, he said, the shepherds show us the way: "The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen, as they had been told" (Lk 2:20). Just as the shepherds went back to their everyday lives, he explained, we too must return to our everyday lives transformed: "Christmas is passing. But we must return to family life, to work, transformed, we must return glorifying and praising God for all that we have heard and seen."

Be witnesses of the Good News, Pope Francis concluded, "bring the good news to the world: Jesus is our Saviour: we must tell everyone!" This is something we must do wherever and whenever possible he said, with the witness of our lives, with the joy and serenity that comes to us from faith and love: joy and serenity in spite of everything, above all else. "Difficulties and sufferings cannot obscure the light of Christmas, which inspires an inner joy that nothing and no one can take away from us."