

Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Holy Family

(Please read and/or make available at all Masses during the weekend of the 28/29th December 2019)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

When we look at images of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the crib this Christmas with eyes of faith we can rejoice in the great truth of the Incarnation- 'God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son'.

The Christmas story and the vision of the crib also reaches beyond the boundaries of the Church. Amongst all peoples there is a longing for something better, a glimpse of heaven upon earth. In the words of today's second reading, 'You are God's chosen race, his saints; he loves you, and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience'. At Christmastide, especially, these values can come alive in our families and communities.

Yet in the Christmas Story there are troubling elements that can fill us with anxiety. The Holy Family were migrants travelling from the security of Nazareth to the homelessness of Bethlehem. In today's Gospel Joseph is warned of great danger: 'Get up, take His mother and the child with you and escape into Egypt and stay there until I tell you because Herod intends to search for the child and do away with him.'

It can sometimes seem impossible to glimpse the things of heaven in today's world. We are confronted with the needs of refugees, the appalling struggles faced by victims of trafficking, the enduring realities of war and injustice. Sometimes there has been an absence of compassion and kindness even within the community of the Church which have caused great scandal regardless of faith. Young people notice and name most acutely this mismatch between aspiration and reality. It is often our young who have been prophetic in talking about climate change and its potentially terrible consequences.

The presence of the Child Redeemer at Bethlehem is an enduring sign of hope for the Church and for the world. In his Apostolic Exhortation this year, (*Christus Vivit*), addressed to young people and the entire people of God, Pope Francis urges us not to make the Church grow old, "encase her in the past, hold her back or keep her at a standstill".

"The Church is young when she is herself, when she receives ever anew the strength born of God's Word, the Eucharist, and the daily power of his Spirit in our lives. The Church is young when she shows herself capable of constantly returning to her source."

This Christmas, Pope Francis has written movingly of the Crib of Bethlehem. Recalling how St Francis built a crib, not with figures and statues, but with real people and animals he writes: "The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey... He became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him."

During the coming New Year I invite all members of the diocese to a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ who longs to bring us more and more into his family.

In the words of St Francis of Assisi to his followers, "We are spouses of Christ when the faithful soul is joined by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers (and sisters) to Him when we do the will of the Father who is in heaven. We are mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through divine love... and give birth to Him through a holy activity which must shine as an example before others".

As in previous years our crib offerings during this season will be forwarded to the Brentwood Catholic Children's Society – please give generously to this great work of our Diocesan Family.

Wishing you a very happy Christmas Celebration and many blessings for your families and communities in the New Year,

Yours in Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm
Bishop of Brentwood