



Christmas Eve & Christmas Day 2020

Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Thursday 24 December & Friday 25 December 2020
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As we gather together here in the Cathedral to celebrate this Christmas Mass, Christians in every land are all doing the same thing, seeking, like us, to welcome Christ into their lives. All across the world, struggling in so many ways to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, people are looking for hope and for some sense of comfort and security in the midst of so much uncertainty. The Christmas story, as always, invites us to turn our eyes to the Christmas crib and we do so this year acutely conscious of our need for peace and for hope. So let us do that now, and reflect on what we see before us.

Certainly we see the shepherds who come into Bethlehem after hearing the strange, stirring song of the angels. We are inclined, I suspect, to think of the shepherds in a romantic way, imagining them perhaps to be gentle animal lovers. In fact, in Jesus' time, shepherds were tough, uneducated men who lived out in the open in difficult conditions. They were often looked down upon by everyone else and were rejected and mistrusted. And yet, it was these people whom God chose to be the first to hear the good news of the birth of the saviour, the Son of God. Perhaps God wants to remind us, through this choice, that our way of seeing people and judging people is very different to God's way. The people we might look down on and regard as unimportant or even untrustworthy are the very people whom God seems to favour in a special way. This Christmas God is inviting us to see the world and people through his eyes rather than our own and to honour and respect people, not because of what they own or what they have achieved, but rather because of what lies in their hearts. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped us to do this. So many of our new heroes are those who have continued to serve the community in all kinds of ways and often at their own risk. It has been their courage and their generosity which has inspired us, not their celebrity or their wealth.

As well as the shepherds we might also see the wise men. Although they were not there on the night Jesus was born they did arrive sometime later. We speak of them as kings and imagine that there were three of them because the gospel speaks of the three gifts they offered. In fact, the gospel only tells us that some wise men came from the East. We cannot be sure if they were rulers or spiritual leaders in their own cultures, but they were certainly very different from the shepherds. The wise men were well-educated, probably wealthy, and certainly well-respected. And yet, more than anything else, these wise men were seekers. They were people who had



come to realize that there was more to life than the ordinary things they could see around them. They were men who had managed to prevent the day-to-day worries, problems and challenges of their lives from blinding them to the deeper truths which we can't always see with our eyes. They were open to God and to the search for God in their lives. And so God chose them, just as he chose the shepherds, to be a part of the Christmas story. This year, once again, God is inviting us to remember that there is more to life than meets the eye. Tonight (today) God is inviting us to see beyond the ordinary things of life to the deeper truth that he is at the heart of everything, including and especially our lives, and that we will always be unsettled and unsatisfied until we make room for him.

As well as the shepherds and the wise men, at the centre of the stable at Bethlehem we see Mary and Joseph. Joseph stands out in the gospel story as a man of extraordinary fidelity. Although he doesn't understand the mystery that has overtaken his life he remains faithful to Mary, his wife, and, of course, remains faithful to God. It seems to me that this is perhaps the best thing about St Joseph, and the thing which we can learn from him. We cannot always understand what God is doing, especially when our lives are overtaken by difficulty, by sadness or by confusion, as has so often been the case this year, but if we can put our trust in God and commit ourselves to remaining faithful to him, as St Joseph did, then we will eventually find the peace in our lives that only God can give. It is no wonder, then, that Pope Francis has announced that this coming twelve months will be a special year dedicated to Saint Joseph.

Mary, of course, is the great model of fidelity and of trust. She was able to say *yes* to all that God was asking of her and the fidelity she showed at the start of the gospel story never faltered. She was still there at the foot of the cross, watching her beloved son die, not fully understanding the mystery of God's plan perhaps, but still completely faithful to it. Perhaps the secret of Mary's fidelity lies in a simple statement which Saint Luke makes about her in his gospel: *Mary treasured everything that happened to her and pondered over it in her heart*. Mary didn't just let things happen to her. She reflected and pondered and prayed over everything and so came to understand more and more the mysterious way in which God was working in her life. In this year of Covid-19 perhaps we, too, are being invited to look deeply into all that has happened to us in order to discover what God might be asking of us.

These people, gathered around the crib in the stable at Bethlehem, have a lot to offer us as we celebrate the birth of Jesus. The shepherds can teach us to try and look at the world and at people with fresh eyes, with God's eyes. The wise men can teach us to be seekers who know that there is more to life than meets the eye, and that the mystery of God stands at the heart of every life, including our own. St Joseph can teach us about the importance of fidelity, even when we do not understand what God is doing. And Mary can be a reminder to us that, like her, we need to reflect on our lives in order to discover the presence of God and the call of God as he speaks to us through the events of our lives.



But most of all, these different people who gather around the crib can remind us of the most important thing. Their eyes are fixed on the child lying in the manger. It is God who has called them to Bethlehem so that, each in his or her own way, they can meet and welcome the one who is *God among us*. That same God has enabled us to celebrate this beautiful Christmas Mass so that we can encounter Christ, who is God among us, and welcome him into our lives. Again this year he is with us offering us the gift of peace. It is a gift which can enrich our lives, the lives of our families, the life of our community and the life of the world. All we have to do is say yes, as Mary did, to the gift the Lord offers.