

# BLESSED CHRIST'S MASS !

*parish priest's pastoral letter for Christmas 2011*

My dear friends,

On this blessed night, once again making our faithful pilgrimage to the Christmas Crib in the darkness, we come in hope and joy, compelled by the rumour of God's habitation in human flesh. Catching the song of angels in the night, we have come to see this thing which has come to pass. With the faithfulness of blessed Mary and Joseph we endeavour to cooperate in the miracle of 'God with us'. And with all the faithful down the ages we too long for an era of peace and justice.

Yet we also come as those overwhelmed by terrible loss. This time last year when we gathered in the Rose Historic Chapel we might have thought we were temporarily displaced persons. One year on, however, the sacred vessel which was the precious external container of the Divine image for us is gone – smashed, demolished, cleared away. We have been profoundly stripped. Of course, we are not alone, and indeed our whole city has been profoundly stripped. This is a traumatised city - it would be a mistake to underestimate the magnitude of this assault on our psychological, mental, physical and spiritual well-being. A great deal has been written about resilience, ingenuity, persistence, creativity, and compassion, and so on – thanks be to God for all this! We are certainly all going to need all the resilience and perseverance we can muster in the years ahead – and thanks be to God for those who are courageously leading the way. And we ourselves now have begun to make building plans for 2012. Nevertheless, while we can do no other than move forward, it would be a mistake to ignore the trauma. Moreover, it would be all the greater a mistake to miss the meaning.

As we celebrate this feast of the Incarnation the loss of the physical structure which housed, contained something of the Divine image seems all the more shocking. A child is naturally attracted to the Christmas Crib, the child's open mind readily able to catch a glimpse of the Divine presence, the ordinary become supra-ordinary, holy even. Later, under the influence of psychological and social development and life's complexity, it becomes mere decoration, just a backdrop to the season of consumption, family, and holidays, no longer able to meaningfully and developmentally mediate the Divine presence. It's as though the Crib had been destroyed by powerful psychological-seismic forces. The Crib had mediated the Divine presence at an early stage of development, thus its 'destruction' means that the Divine presence no longer has a safe container. We should not underestimate the spiritual crisis of such a state of affairs – especially for those who cannot make the necessary transition.

The 1909 stone church building was such a container – like a giant-sized Crib, the whole story of God's salvation in Christ told in its stones, windows, paintings, in the beauty of its Victorian Gothic light and texture. Only those who could never appreciate the importance and profundity of sacred space claim that it was 'just a building'. We know, however, that the gracious and spacious 1909 building was a profound container for the Divine image – a physical manifestation of Incarnation, of the Word made flesh, of God in Christ. Now gone, never to be replaced. It would be a mistake to underestimate the spiritual crisis these events have precipitated. It is not surprising that demolition (partial or otherwise) of the Cathedral-in-the-Square should generate such passions in this city – for until now that building has housed the Divine image for the 'religious' and 'non religious' alike, regardless whether persons may or not be conscious of that fact. Broken, smashed, demolished, what is to become of the God image in Christ-church now?

Where now is the Christ being born? Actually, the answer is the same as it ever was. God has always been assuming flesh, always coming to birth in the human cradle, the individual human sacred vessel – poor, humble, homeless, barren. And, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, consenting to that which seems impossible, pondering all these things in our hearts, having our hearts wounded by this unsought visitation. Christ is always being born, wrote Meister Eckhart in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. We ourselves are to be the humble manger in which the Divine comes to birth. Our frail

flesh is Mary, God bearer, Mother of God. The timeless eternal Divine Presence overshadows us. Our active, willed participation carries and gives birth to the Divine in time and space. Incrementally, a lifetime task, God becomes enfleshed, housed, manifest in the human soul, through active and participant human consciousness.

Of course, what complicates this task is that we still do need our external containers, our gracious and sacred church buildings. Because we are not yet at that stage of evolution in human consciousness when we ourselves will fully embody the Divine image, when we ourselves will come to the full maturity and stature of Christ, when it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. In the mean time, the external structures which until now have contained that image stripped from us, let us once again go up to that Bethlehem within, to that manger which is the cradle of the Divine in the soul. Let us go, though sent from our native lands and from all familiarity. Let us not be afraid.

'And suddenly there was with angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among people of goodwill."

With my love,

Fr David