

EPIPHANY

*Fairer than the sun at morning
was the star that told his birth;
To the lands their God announcing,
Seen in human form on earth.*

*By it's peerless beauty guided
See the Eastern Kings appear;
Bowling low, their gifts they offer,
Gifts of incense, gold and myrrh.*

I really love the set-up of our two cribs this year. At the front of the church, as you come from the road onto the drive, the first figure you encounter, standing under the tree, is one of the three wise men. He is obviously on his way to Bethlehem. Beyond him, in front of the church wall, stands the shed where Mary and Joseph are kneeling in adoration of their new-born baby. At a distance to the left and to the right of the crib are the other two kings also on their separate journeys to Bethlehem.

Inside the church, the second crib is situated in front of the octagonal altar under the great arch from which hangs the beautiful rood. Again, Mary and Joseph, accompanied by the shepherds are kneeling or standing in awe before the divine child. The wise men are situated separately away from the crib. They still haven't come together in Jerusalem. It made me realise that these three wise and intelligent men were not lifelong friends on a wild epic adventure. They were probably complete strangers, upright wealthy and educated men who had a shared vision. They had seen a sign in the sky which filled them with a great determination to make a long, difficult and hazardous journey of discovery to find where the star would lead them. It must have taken a great deal of preparation and yet it was no coincidence that they arrived at the same place and at the same time. They did not know what they would find at the end of their journey or even what to expect. All they knew was that it would be momentous, an event that would change the world. They first tried the palace of King Herod but were disappointed for the answer was not there. The star led them further to the little town of Bethlehem.

The remarkable thing is how they interpreted what they found there. A common working man with his young wife and their baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid on a bed of straw in a stable fit only for animals. Yet, these rich and educated men, gentiles, immediately fell on their knees to worship the child lying there. They did not feel the hardness of the ground nor worry about the damage to their fine clothes for they knew that this baby was the one who would change the world. They presented him with gifts fit for a king. Oh, what faith they displayed!

When I stand before the crib. I cannot but look up to the rood above. The alpha and the omega, the beginning of his life on earth and the end of his life on earth.

Sacred gifts of mystic meaning:
Incense doth the God disclose,
Gold the King of Kings proclaimeth,
Myrrh a future tomb foreshows.

In thy glory, O Lord Jesus,
To the Gentile world displayed
With the Father and The Spirit
Endless praise to thee be given

LET'S TALK! LET'S LISTEN!

I heard, on TV, a young man who was referring to Gen-Z (pronounced Zee) and I asked my granddaughter what it meant. She told me it stood for Generation-Z who were born just before and after the millennium and are now in their twenties. I then asked her what my generation is called and was informed that it is known as the silent generation. I wondered why we would be called that. Do those who have categorised the generations think that those of us who are still living are too old to have an opinion and don't matter? If that is the case, they can think again for we have a wealth of knowledge and experience and should be listened to.

Perhaps we have been labelled as silent because we lived through and endured an era of deep depression and terrible conflict. We came to maturity experiencing shortage and rationing and anxiety. Many families had lost at least one parent during the war. It was a time of division and bias and naivety. Our society had problems such as racism, homophobia and sexual inequality which we didn't understand and many of us were not even aware of. We were struggling to recover from the war and rebuild our towns and cities.

The Christian church was also divided, mainly Catholic and Protestant. Catholics celebrated St. Patrick's Day while protestants celebrated King Billy's Day. Even in cities like Liverpool and Glasgow, rival football teams had a religious bias, one would be catholic and the other protestant. People in those days found it difficult to talk about their faith which was considered to be a personal and private matter. Vatican 2 came as a breath of fresh air. What a difference it made. Different denominations started talking and working together. The mass, which previously seemed like a weekly drama performed in a foreign language which many did not understand, became a beautiful and meaningful ceremony which we could all understand and participate in.

I admire my grandchildren and their generation for they seem to be aware of and understand the problems of the past, present and future and are trying hard to do something about them. They are certainly more aware than we were at that age and are not afraid to speak out. They should be encouraged for they are the ones who will make the decisions in the future. During this synodal journey in which Pope Francis has invited us to participate and walk together, we have a duty to listen and talk to one another. We, the silent generation, must talk to our children and grandchildren. We must try to draw them back to the church, to God's family. We have a lot to learn from them but we have a lot of experience and wisdom to contribute too. I do not find it easy to talk about my faith but I have always tried to play an active part in parish life. Unfortunately, I am no longer able to do many of the things I used to do and it is a sadness. A good friend advised me that growing old was not for the fainthearted and he was right but I think it gives us many opportunities to offer little sacrifices of thanksgiving to God. And I have found other ways of praising him. I am able to express my faith in writing and I've been told I have a nice voice so I can sing God's praise each week at mass

Let's pray! Let's listen! Let's talk!

Let us not allow ourselves to be categorised and manipulated. Let us listen with humble and contrite hearts to the word of God and ask Him to help us and watch over us as we walk together on this journey.

O Holy Spirit, open our minds and hearts and help us to reach out to all communities, young and old; rich and poor; the strong and the weak; those with faith and those with no faith; those with other faiths no matter what their colour or race or lifestyle; the hungry and the needy. Let us not judge but listen with an open mind and a humble heart to what they say.

CONSEQUENCES

Happy the man who stands firm when trials come. He has proved himself, and will win the prize of life, the crown that the Lord promised to those who love him. (The letter of St. James 1; 12.)

In his letter, St. James warns us against blaming God for all the things that go wrong. When bad things happen, often we ask why is God doing this. When disasters occur, we ask why has God let this happen. Perhaps, the question should be, what have we done to cause this or what have we not done to prevent it happening. I read an article the other day that claimed the terrible recent fires in Australia were not just due to global warming but that British colonisation was partly to blame. It seems that the indigenous people of that country had, for centuries, practised a method of management, "cultural burning", which involved small controlled fires of vegetation which ended, so the study claims, when the British came in 1788. I only mention this as an example to illustrate that whatever we do or say, however great or small, has a consequence.

We must never act without thought, we must never speak without thinking about what we are saying. St. James advises us to ask God first. If we do what is right, we please God. If we know what is the right thing to do and fail or refuse to do it, we are committing sin. Everything we say and do and everything we choose not to do effects our lives and possibly the lives of others. Fr. Francis, in one of his homilies, advised us to guard our thoughts for our thoughts become our words and our words become our actions.

Soon after I started writing this reflection, the news of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was confirmed. This event will surely have, dreadful consequences, not only for Ukraine but throughout the whole world. Since then, we have been haunted with images of terrible cruelty, merciless and indiscriminate bombing of civilians, children's nurseries and hospitals.

I do not believe that the Russian people want war nor do they hate us. They want only what we have, freedom! Freedom to say and do what we think is right; freedom to choose our leaders and dismiss them when they fail us; Freedom to worship the God we believe in and trust. We in the West have all this but have become complacent and taken it for granted. We have removed God from much of our lives. We forget that with freedom comes responsibility. The responsibility to make sure that what we say and do does not harm others but rather helps those who share our lives. When God made man, He gave him freewill. The freedom to love him or reject him. That is the basic human right of every human being. This war is not God's will it is the result of one man's evil lust for power and the greed of those who supported and encouraged him.

If only nations could learn to share one language, the language of love. It is an easy language to learn. There are no words to remember. It comes straight from the heart. If we truly have love in our hearts, we will always say a kind word and do the right thing. It is never too late to turn again to God. Let us turn to him and pray, not with words but with humble and contrite hearts.

So, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another and this will cure you; the heartfelt prayer of a good man works very powerfully. (The letter of St. James 5:16)

ETERNITY

May the Lord bless us and lead us to eternal life.

In my early years at primary school, Sr. Marie de Lourdes told my parents that I was “slow but sure”. I’m not quite sure what she meant by that but a few years later I was not too slow to gain a scholarship to the grammar school. However, I have already mentioned in a previous reflection how my Physics teacher thought me a complete write off, “freewheeling down the hill to failure and sipping sorrow from the spoon of grief”. Years later, when I was working and building a home for my family, my lifelong friend often quoted one of his favourite maxims “Work expands to the time allotted”. I thought he was just gently advising me to get a move on. Many, many years later, now I’m retired, I’m beginning to appreciate the wisdom of that saying.

When we first retire, we begin to wonder how we ever found the time to go to work. We throw ourselves enthusiastically into filling our new found freedom doing things we haven’t done before such as travelling across the country to visit grandchildren who are now at university; travelling abroad; finding new places to eat out; gardening and decorating. We begin to explore new interests, new skills. I purchased a laptop and learned how to use it and although I am still nowhere near computer literate, it led me to discover a talent I was not previously aware of. I started writing. As we advance in years, our minds tell us we are still young but our bodies tell us a different story’. Time seems to stretch while we slow down and have difficulty finding things, we are able to do to fill it.

Time is an enigma. I look back over the years and ask myself “How did I get to this age? Where did all those years go?” When I was a child, I didn’t think about time other than how birthdays and Christmas were a long time coming. My time was spent in the *now*; in my imagination; playing or reading; listening to stories being read or creating my own fantasy world. When I reached adulthood, I put all my efforts into furthering my career and building a home for my family. I spent a lot of time living in the future, making plans, setting targets. In old age, a lot of time is spent in the past, looking back, reminiscing on the way we were and being proud of what we have achieved, a long and happy marriage and a wonderful family and perhaps a little rueful about what we didn’t do. As I grow older, I have become more aware of my mortality. I try to contemplate eternity, an existence where time no longer exists but I am unable to comprehend it. I hope and pray that it will be in God’s eternal kingdom, a never-ending spiritual ecstasy of love in the presence of God.

Last week we meditated on Jesus’ passion, his suffering and death and I thought how much Jesus has done for me and how little I have done for him. I think that I will be judged not so much on what I have done, rather on the things I have failed to do. The chances I’ve had to help others and not even realised they were in need; The opportunities to step out of my comfort zone to do something for Jesus and failed to take advantage of them.

Now it is Easter, Christ has risen! We are saved, salvation is possible. We only have to recognise and admit our failures and with a firm purpose of amendment look forward to the years ahead and accept whatever God puts before us.

*The love that asks not anything,
Love like thy own free,
Jesu, I give, who art my King,
Who art my God, to thee.*

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want

On Sundays, I try to have a lie in. Instead of getting up at my usual time 7am, I try to sleep through until 8am. However, I still wake at the usual time and always struggle to stay in bed. Two Sundays ago, I woke at my usual time feeling unsettled so I got up to make myself a cup of coffee. As I sat with it in my office for a quiet hour, I thought about my life, past, present and future and my faith. There have been in my life moments of doubt even moments of disbelief. I have even tried consciously to not believe. Because my mind cannot envisage a God as great as He is, it tempts me to reject his existence but deep within there is always something that makes me unable to not believe.

I started then to think about those many people, so dear to me, for whom I pray regularly. People who carry crosses much heavier than the one that has been allotted to me and I thanked God that I had not been tested as they had. I realised that I have already lived most of my life and there cannot be that many more years ahead. I have tried to live a good life but, I wondered, have I been good enough. Have I put myself out enough for others? I have lived an ordinary life and have not done anything remarkable. Have I accomplished the special mission for which God has made me, the one that only I can do? Does He have more in mind for me? Will I be strong enough to cope?

Later, as I entered church, I still felt uneasy. I picked up a parish newsheet in the porch and made my way to my usual seat. I like to get there early to prepare myself for mass. I started reading "Our Faith on Sunday", the short reflections on the front of the newsheet and suddenly realised what day it was, Good Shepherd Sunday. The reflections uplifted me and I became overwhelmed. It was as if they had been written just for me to answer all the questions which had been troubling me since I awoke. I knew that there is nothing I have done, nothing I have failed to do, no sin that I have committed that cannot be forgiven. For He who humbled himself to share in our humanity was prepared to suffer and die for us to wash away our sins. I thought of that beautiful poem "Footsteps in the sand" and realised that Jesus has been with me throughout my life and in those most difficult times he has supported me. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who has always watched over me and protected me. I can look forward to the future with confidence. I trust him, He will be with me. He will not abandon me.

I may not have lived a remarkable life, nor have I changed the world but I have followed and put my trust in the one who leads me, my Good Shepherd.

My soul He doth restore again,

And me to walk doth make

Within the paths of righteousness

GROUPS

Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Matt. 18:20)

I have never been one for joining groups. I was never a boy scout, although I did join St Annes boys club and played in their football team, However, many years ago, I attended a couple of charismatic prayer group meetings. It was at a time in my life when I had recently been made redundant and was looking for employment. I was invited and reassured that it would help me through the difficult spell I was going through. I tried to attend the meetings with an open mind but I did not feel comfortable. I am not criticizing those who attended the meetings and am sure they were sincere and were experiencing a very real and deep and spiritual renewal of faith but it didn't happen for me.

I have always believed In God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and also in the holy Catholic church. Throughout my teenage years, after my dad was taken from us, my faith grew steadily for I believed that he was in Heaven watching over me and praying for me. When I married my wife and started a family with her, my faith became even more important to me. Perhaps that is why I felt so uncomfortable at those meetings.

I have come to realise that I am not good in large groups, much more comfortable in small groups of two or three and even better in a one-to-one situation which perhaps explains why I am wary of groups and tend to shy away from them. I am not a spontaneous type of person for I do not think quick enough. My good friend has always called me a thinker. I was recently asked about starting a prayer group and gave it much thought but I realised I am already part of a wonderful prayer group. Each morning we attend mass. Some of us come early to spend some quiet time before the Blessed Sacrament. It is a time of peace and tranquillity when I can be alone with Jesus in a one-to-one relationship. After morning prayers, many more join us for the celebration of mass and Holy Communion after which some stay to pray the rosary while the rest of us make our way to the carpark, chatting and catching up with one another.

Before I make my way to church, I'm up around seven and spend about an hour in my office reading or writing or just thinking. This whole morning routine is very important to me for most days I find it hard to find time for prayer during the rest of the day. The group is a wonderful group and very dear to me but I realise it is a part of an even bigger group, the parish community of St. Winefrides. I have worshipped here for over fifty years and love this church and its family. Of course, the parish is part of an even greater universal group, the Holy Catholic Church. So, perhaps, my problem is not with groups rather with my own inability to feel comfortable in them, A recognition of my own faults and failings.

O Jesus, enter into my heart, teach me, show me how best I can serve you. Teach me to not judge others and to- "preach you without preaching – not by words but by my example and by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what I do." (St John Henry Newman)

What am I to do?

*Praise Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Blest trinity and source of grace,
Who calls us out of nothingness
To find in you our resting place*

When I saw the pictures displayed on the television screen of a star that had never been seen before, I had feelings of wonder and awe and unease. It was the furthest star ever to have been photographed and was billions of lightyears away. I was uneasy not because I disbelieved what I was seeing but rather that this was proof of the greatness of God who created all that is. I am less than a speck of dust in this vast creation and yet God knows me, loves me and is even aware of every hair on my head.

In recent weeks, due to health reasons, I have not been able to physically attend mass but have been able to virtually attend by means of modern technology and have received spiritual communion. Even so, I have found it hard to pray or even to reflect. I wondered how can I, such a tiny speck of dust, serve such an almighty God. What must I do to please Him? I found my answer in Micah (6: 1-4 1-8)

*What is good has been explained to you, man,
This is what the Lord asks of you:
Only this, to act justly,
To love tenderly
And to walk humbly with your God.*

When I meet someone, I can observe what he/she does and how he does it, I can listen to what he says and I can look into his eyes, but I can never see the whole picture. I do not know what circumstance he has experienced to make him who he is today, therefore I cannot judge him. If he is hungry, I must feed him. If he is injured, I must help him. If he does not believe in God, I must try to enlighten him but I cannot force him. I can only pray that he will see in me a flicker of the light that comes from the one who has redeemed us. If he opposes me and abuses me, I must not retaliate in the same manner. I must love him tenderly and pray for him. To love tenderly is to love without condition, asking nothing in return. I can walk humbly with God knowing that I have nothing that has not been given to me. I have done nothing that God has not given me the means and opportunity to do. I am nothing that has not been made by him.

O Lord, you have given me so much and I have so little to give you in return.

I have only myself and I offer myself to you,
All that I have,
All that I do
And all that I am.

But I am weak and timid and sinful.

Strengthen me and encourage me that I may dedicate my life to you.

Grant me the wisdom to always know
What is the right thing to do.

LISTEN

Faith comes from what is heard. And what is heard comes through the word of Christ

(Romans 10:17)

I have sometimes wondered why we who are getting old have to lose some of our faculties. I have lived a long time and although I have sometimes been a bit slow to learn, I do have a lot of experience and insight but my eyes are failing and my ears need aids to hear what people are saying and my memory is not always reliable, so How can I best make use of that experience and insight.

The other day, while tidying my office, I came across a “message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 56th World Day of Social Communication”. It was entitled “Listening with the ears of the heart”. I have to admit I picked it up in church some weeks ago, brought it home, put it down meaning to read it later and forgot about it. I have now read it and wonder if God has allowed my eyes and ears to fail so that I could learn to see and hear with my heart. When I am in a conversation with another, how many times I have wanted to cry out “You’re not listening to me”. How many times have I heard it in real life and in television dramas? As Pope Francis points out, we seem to be losing the ability to listen to the people we are trying to converse with.

We all want and need to be heard but it is so difficult these days to know what to make of all the information that is coming at us from all sides; some good, some bad; some true, some false. I do not have a social media account and I am sometimes tempted to not read a newspaper nor listen to news programmes. They all seem to be biased one way or another but it would be wrong for me to bury my head in the sand. The world is in such a critical state. Apart from the threat of global warming, we have the leaders of the most powerful nations threatening each other with unthinkable consequences if any nation opposes or tries to interfere with what they are doing, while people in poorer countries are dying of starvation due to the actions of those stronger countries. And even in the less poor countries, people are struggling to keep up with the rising cost of living. Around the world, millions of refugees are homeless. Nobody is listening to what the other is saying. Everybody is so concerned with their own problems they are not ready to listen to the needs of others.

In his message, I think that Pope Francis is addressing not only we Catholics but all good men of all religions. He is calling us to listen to one another, to work together to bring about a better world and to pray together for guidance. “As in a choir, unity does not require uniformity, monotony, but plurality and variety of voices, polyphony”. (pope Francis) Has there ever been a time when the need for prayer is so urgent? But, as Pope Francis says, prayer must not be a monologue. We can storm heaven with pleas for peace, security and answers to our problems but we must also listen to what God has to say.

God does not usually talk to us from a cloud with a voice like thunder but in the whisper of a breeze with a voice so tender, so soft and gentle which we cannot hear except with the ears of the heart. Let us pray, let us listen.

THE MASS

From the rising of the Sun to its setting, a perfect offering is made.

It saddens me when I hear young people say that the mass is boring, that it is the same old thing, the same old prayers. Some people think there should be more singing and dancing but to me, the mass is an awesome miracle that is recurring, somewhere in the world at every hour. As the Earth spins on its axis and the Sun rises in the east, a new day begins, a mass is being offered somewhere in the world. Just as Jesus changed water into wine, at each mass he changes the bread and the wine into his own body and blood. Somewhere throughout the world, that awesome miracle is reoccurring. It is our approach to it that is important. The mass is not an entertainment. We do not attend to just watch and listen; we are there to participate wholeheartedly.

The mass is a wonderful ceremony with many beautiful prayers. We begin by calling to mind our weaknesses and admitting the things we have done that may have offended God's infinite goodness and the things we have failed to do; the things we could have done, should have done but never got round to doing. On Sundays and feast days we say or sing the Gloria, a joyful prayer of praise, adoration and thanksgiving to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. After a moment of silent prayer, the priest then introduces the liturgy of the word when we listen to readings from the old and New Testament and a psalm followed by a passage from the Gospels. The readings vary every day and are sometimes not easy to understand. I like to familiarise myself with them beforehand by reading through them at home before coming to church so that I can follow and understand better the message they hold.

After the homily, profession of faith and the bidding prayers we come to the offertory when we ask God to accept our gifts of bread and wine which we offer with humble and contrite hearts. I love the prayer which the priest says quietly as he mixes a drop of water with the wine, "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity." We then ask God to cleanse us from our sins.

The preface after which we say or sing "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts," leads us to the climax of the mass, The Consecration when the great miracle happens. As the priest repeats the words that Jesus said over the bread and wine the night before he died, Jesus becomes one with us again. The bread and wine become his body and blood. As the priest elevates the Host and chalice, I gaze at them and whisper the words of the believing Thomas, "My Lord and my God". When the Eucharistic prayer comes to an end with "Through him, with him and in him, O God, almighty Father, in unity with the Holy Spirit. All honour and glory are yours, for ever and ever", then we all proclaim: Amen.

We stand to say the perfect prayer, the one that Jesus himself taught to his disciples, the Lord's Prayer after which we pray that he will grant us peace and unity. As we say or sing the "Lamb of God", the priest breaks the host and adds a small piece in the chalice and I am reminded that Jesus became the sacrificial lamb that died to redeem us making salvation possible. The priest again holds up the host and the chalice and says "Behold the Lamb of God" and we all respond with the wonderful prayer of the centurion, "Lord, I am not worthy". As I approach the altar for Holy Communion, I try to do so with utmost reverence and sincerity.

Since I was a little boy serving on the altar chanting the responses which I had learned by heart but didn't understand the Latin meaning, I think I have always loved the mass. There may have been a time when I felt it was an obligation but as the years have passed, I have come to appreciate and love it more. I pray there will never come a time when I am not able to make it to mass on my own but if that happens, I pray that there will always be someone kind enough to take me.

FAITH and HUMILITY

*The Lord's is the earth and all its fullness
The world and all its peoples
It is he set the seas
On the waters he made it firm.*

There is the old conundrum; which comes first the chicken or the egg? I have one of my own; which comes first faith or humility? Can you have faith without having the humility to accept the existence and perfection of God and also acknowledge our own imperfection. On the other hand, can we be truly humble without having a modicum of faith. Even if one only believes in good and evil and chooses to be good, that is a kind of faith for goodness is godliness and displays some humility. We know that pride caused the downfall of man and it is pride and self-indulgence that is destroying our world today. I think, perhaps, that faith and humility go hand in hand. We cannot have one without the other.

When Saul was persecuting the early church, did he really believe in a merciful God? What was his motivation? Did he believe he was doing God's work. Did he lack the humility to question what he was doing? Surely, when he witnessed the death of Stephen, it must have given him cause for doubt. On the road to Damascus, his conversion was sudden and dramatic. He was humbled and forced to think again what God wanted of him. It was certainly life changing; from persecutor to one who spread the word to the non-Jewish world; from tent maker to architect building communities; from Saul to Paul and from sinner to saint.

In his letter to the Galatians (5:18-25), Paul tells us what pride and self-indulgence leads to and gives us a litany of sins. He then goes on to list what humility and faith brings; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. Oh, how we need those qualities to day! Our world is such a very troubled one and so many have turned away from God. Few seem to be prepared to sacrifice some of what they have for the good of those who have not.

There is no need for a conflict between religions. There is only one God and he loves us all. Although we come from many different cultures and backgrounds and worship him in many different ways, who can claim that I am better than you and that our way is better than yours. It is not how we worship but what is in our hearts. If we have true faith in God and true humility and all those qualities they bring, we can live side by side with our neighbours in peace. War between nations does not solve anything, it is self-destructing. It destroys communities; towns and cities; people and nations.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells us about the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple. I realise that I am often like the Pharisee for I have always tried to keep the commandments and attended mass and received the sacraments. My life has been very blessed but not because of anything I have done to deserve it. I have felt grateful for all the graces and blessings God has bestowed upon us. Yet I have judged others without knowing the circumstances of their lives. When these thoughts come into my mind, I try to dispel them immediately and seek forgiveness with the prayer of the tax collector, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

*O Jesus, you have given me so much
And I have so little to give to you.
I have only myself
and I offer myself to you,
All that I am; all that I have; all that I do.
But I am weak, timid, sinful.
Give me the strength and the courage
To dedicate my life to you.*

A NEW BEGINNING

Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to stand with confidence before the son of man.

We are in the first week of a new liturgical year. The recent daily readings, as usual at the end of the previous year, were apocalyptic and in Luke's gospel, in answer to their questions about the end times, Jesus told his disciples "Nation will fight against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes and plagues and famines here and there; There will be fearsome sights and great signs from heaven". Yet Jesus also tells them not to be afraid. When we listen to and read about world news, is it any wonder that people think that it is all happening now? No wonder there is such an increase in mental health problems.

I watched a programme the other night called "Alexander Armstrong in South Korea". In it, Alexander visited a place of retreat, The surrounding countryside was beautiful and very peaceful. The purpose of the retreat was to encourage people to regard death in a more positive way. It had Alexander sitting in a coffin while a guru gently spoke to him. The guru told him to imagine he was dead and asked him questions about his life such as who would be crying for him and what had he done in his life; what was he proud of and what would he change if he could. The guru then asked Alexander to lie down in the coffin while he covered the lid over him for a minute. When the lid was removed and he sat up again I think Alexander was very moved by the whole experience, not morbidly but positively. As we advance toward Christmas, we should not need to go to such extremes for, as Christians, we should already regard death in a positive way for we know that it is not an end but a new beginning; a change from one existence to a much greater and happier existence.

I have been on this earth for over four fifths of a century, more than the average lifespan and have become very aware of my mortality. I am very grateful for all the blessings and graces God has bestowed upon me throughout my whole life. For my age, I am reasonably healthy, although my faculties are slowly deserting me. My eyes and ears are failing and my reactions are slower than they once were which prevent me from doing many of the things I used to enjoy doing but there is one thing I can still do. I can still sing and it gives me great joy to attend mass and sing God's praise. I pray that God will allow me to do so for as many more years as I have left. I am looking forward to Christmas with great anticipation, especially the music.

I am not a prophet nor can I see into the future. I do not know what the future has in store for me or for anyone but I know that if I keep faith and put all my trust in him, God will not fail me.

*Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;
Hail the God who saves us.
Let us come before him, giving thanks,
With songs let us hail the Lord.*

CHILDREN OF GOD

*I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do.
(Luke 10:210)*

Advent is a time for reflection. I have been thinking about who I am and what I am and why I am who and what I am. I know that I am not one of the learned and the clever. I am more of a plodder; my thinking is pedestrian. I sometimes do and say things without thinking but most of the time, I tend to over-think and find it hard to make decisions. I was born into a catholic family and throughout my life have been surrounded by good and Christian people which is why I have been able to keep my faith, but it is not something I take for granted. I do not believe because that is how I was brought up. I have questioned my faith many times and have received signs that have kept me reassured. Little things that others would call coincidences but they have been so numerous and in such a timely order that I cannot accept them as coincidental.

I believe in God the creator of all that is. I find it more logical to believe in a God that has no beginning and no end who created all that is than to believe that the universe came into being by accident. Without God, our existence has no sense or meaning. If there was a "big bang", there must have been a cause; a creator that was able to bring about such an event. I believe that God is a perfect and loving god. Why would he not love all that he has created? God did not create anything that was not perfect but mankind has become corrupted by his own pride, greed and selfishness. There is a vast abyss between the corruption of mankind and the perfection of God which man on his own cannot bridge. Only Jesus Christ who humbled himself by putting aside his divinity and became one with us can reconcile us to the Father. He took on our humanity so that we could share in his divinity. That is why Christmas is such an important and wonderful feast. By being born to a virgin in such humble circumstances and becoming one with us has he made reconciliation possible. He is the bridge across that abyss.

I love Christmas and although the present circumstances will make this year very difficult for everybody, it also gives us an opportunity to contemplate the real meaning of Christmas; to put aside all the commercialisation and fantasy and focus on the most wonderful event in the history of mankind. The fancy Christmas lights may cheer us but only the light of Jesus can save us. All the expensive gifts we give to one another are perishable. The eucharist is the only gift that will last forever.

This last week before Christmas is a time to be joyful and full of hope. The liturgy tells us of the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. I pray that God will help us to care for the sick, give food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless and bring peace to our troubled world. May we all have a happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

Rejoice in the Lord always.

And again, I say rejoice.

Rejoice, rejoice,

And again, I say rejoice.