

December 24, 2024 Christmas 2024

*How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of His heav'n.*

These words from 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' paint a picture of the first Christmas as a gentle idyllic scene. The quiet beauty of a Christmas card depiction of the nativity.

There's a bit of a Victorian image of the first Christmas that does everything it can to mask the fact that today we celebrate a birth. 'How silently, how silently' tries to cast our minds away from the realities of what is involved in this birth as in any birth. These images try to encourage us not to think too much about the fact of this birth itself, but if we must to think that Jesus as God born for us must have popped quietly and gently out.

The truth was probably less of a silent and sanitised affair, not least because this birth takes place behind an inn and there's not the remotest chance of gas and air.

A former Vicar of mine was fond of reminding us each and every Christmas that it was important to reflect on the noise and messiness of this birth, as of any birth. In fact, he would say, this is precisely the point. He would often tell us that the Christmas story isn't a 'lovely story' but the fact of God entering into very depths of human messiness, become one of us and entering into all of the pain and noise of humanity, all the pain and trouble we endure and cause for ourselves and others.

If there's silence here it's not the silence of a miraculous, gentle, and pain-free birth, but it's the silence of God's speaking into all those parts of humanity that we're all too tempted to overlook, the inconvenient suffering of those in other parts of the world, the working conditions of those upon whom we rely, the cover-up of scandal or abuse of power, the failure to act in the face of injustice.

Today we celebrate that if human beings are tempted to be silent about any or all these, God is not. In Christ, God speaks. In fact, in the newborn Christ, God screams.

God's birth in Christ, the birth we celebrate today, with all the noise and pain and messiness of any human birth, is God's means of speaking loudly into each and every human situation, into each and every human life. The Word was made flesh. God speaks into the heart of each and every human being. God enters into solidarity with each and every human being because God takes on humanity, God becomes human for our sake in the life of the baby lying in the manger.

Just as in the very first pages of our Bible God speaks and it is so, 'Let there be light and there was light', so in Christ God speaks to each and every one of us, in each and every place, throughout each and every age. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. The voice of God is never silent, but gently and powerfully overturns all those situations of injustice and silence - not with a bang, but with a whimper. The whimper of a new born that reminds us that is God is with us. The Word is made flesh, and shares with us the potential of a new life in which each and every one us finds our voice.

It's to this life we're invited this Christmas, and each and every time we feed on the Word made flesh in this place, in this Mass and at every Mass as we hold in our hands the one who first became flesh for our sake that first Christmas.

Amen.