

Cardinal's homily for Christmas Midnight Mass

December 25th 2008

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Tonight (today), millions of Christians all over the world will be converging on churches for the celebration of Mass. In this part of the world we come in from the cold, just as it was when the shepherds came to the cave where Jesus was born, and when the Wise Men came from the East with their gifts to adore the new-born child. All of us, the poor and simple, the rich and sophisticated, step out of the darkness to find light, out of the cold to find warmth, out of confusion to find hope and confidence. Yet it is sometimes good to try to recapture the way we looked at things when we were children. This is how G.K. Chesterton put it in a poem:

*When all my days are ending and I have no song to sing,
I think I shall not be too old
to stare at everything
as I stared once at a nursery door
or a tall tree and a swing.*

It is with that sense of wonder and thanksgiving that we welcome the coming of Christ who is Emmanuel, "God with us".

The other day, some of my family came to see me, and there were seventeen young children running around my house. It was lovely to see them: each one is special and each one is different, and they want you to know that: "I'm Emily" – "I'm James" – "I'm Clare" – "I'm Michael", as if to say, "look at me. I'm different; there is no one else like me and that's all there is to it". Every one of us wants to be special, to be acknowledged. We all want to know who we are, to be of value in our own eyes as well as in the eyes of other people. We want to know that we matter. We instinctively seek to belong, to be part of a community. That is so clear to me that it is very hard for me to hear people suggest the old tag that there is no such thing as society. With all our personal joys and griefs, our pleasures and anxieties, we are social beings. What is so stunning about Christmas is that we believe that, in Jesus, God has come among us and has taken on the full range of human experience. For us, this means every human person – rich or poor, sick or

healthy, clever or not, maimed or otherwise – is Christ’s brother or sister, a child of God. Logically, that suggests that every person ought to matter to us as much as a brother or sister does.

Yet something has happened in recent months that could make all this hard to believe. For some time now, what has dominated the news is the unstable state of the economy. You know that I am no economist, and I know that I must be wary of entering territory where I have no expertise. But I cannot ignore the damaging consequences of volatile financial markets. Behind the gloomy headlines are factories, large and small businesses, people’s job prospects, but also cities, neighbourhoods, families and individuals deeply affected by the economic “downturn”; the hardest hit will be the poor, those who were already below the poverty line, people who are struggling to survive. I hope and pray that our problems here in Britain will not make us forget far worse situations in the rest of the world, particularly Africa. When I visited Zimbabwe earlier this year, I was touched and shocked by the poverty and desolation of people there. I think it is good to reflect on a phrase Pope John Paul II used in the last years of his life: he spoke of the need for Christians to develop what he called “a globalisation of solidarity”, with hearts that beat with love for the world’s poorest, as well as for those in trouble closer to home. How terrible if globalisation evolves in an ethical vacuum.

What strikes me in what I hear and read of the current economic crisis is that there has been a breakdown in trust: most people in our country experience this as the humiliation that comes with being refused credit, but there have been some spectacular cases of people at the heart of the financial system acting in such a way that it would be hard for that trust to be regained. Thousands, perhaps millions, of people in this country feel so let down by financial institutions that they are deeply anxious about what the future they had been planning now holds for them and their families.

Christianity neither condemns nor canonises the market economy; it may be an essential element in the conduct of human affairs. But we have to remember that it is a system governed by people, not some blind force like gravity. Those who operate the market have an obligation to act in ways that

promote the common good, not just in ways that promote the interests of certain groups. The market economy will only work justly if it has an underlying moral purpose. But it is unfair to blame only one section of our community for the present crisis, and all is not gloom. Crises always give an opportunity to think again and re-evaluate our own priorities of what makes for a good life and a good society. All of us have an opportunity, each in our own way, to deepen our trust in other people. Because it is people who matter, who comes first. Trust begins in the family but it stretches out to people who live in villages, towns and cities all over our country. One of my hopes this Christmas is that you and I and people everywhere will be able to build communities based on trust, places more like villages than cities, where neighbours have names and faces, where their concerns gradually become our concerns. Basically, my dream is of a society that becomes more deeply human, more satisfying, more hopeful.

The inspiration for my dream is in the Christmas crib scene, the birth of a child in a cave in Bethlehem, bathed in heaven's light. Most of the cribs I have ever seen focus on the way Mary looks at her son with such extraordinary tenderness and love. It is tempting to leave it there at the level of emotion, but the eyes of faith see her gaze as a sign of God's love for the world He created, that love that tells us insistently how much we matter to God, how much we should matter to each other. Ever since that first Christmas at Bethlehem, that town which sees so much suffering today, artists and poets have tried to help others to realise that the angels, the shepherds and even their animals were witnessing something that gives us meaning and hope. What did the prophet say? "The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone". May God bless you all with that light, my dear people. If there is any darkness in your life, may God's love for you be the light that brightens your hearts, your dear families and your homes, and may you share His love with those around you. Many people need to hear the message of Christmas again – or perhaps even for the first time – and to understand what it means for them. It is a message of joy to be shared by the whole people. Please help them. "Today, in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you – He is Christ the Lord" (*Luke 2,12*).