

LIVERPOOL ARCHDIOCESAN CENTRE FOR EVANGELISATION

From the Press Officer:

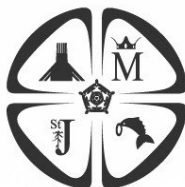
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Introduction to Mass and homily led by the Most Reverend Patrick Kelly, Archbishop of Liverpool, at Midnight Mass of Christmas. Thursday 25 December 2008 in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool.

Also taking part in the homily are other Church Leaders from the Merseyside region including: the Right Reverend James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool; Reverend Philip Jump, Baptist Regional Minister; Major Marian Drew, Commander of the Salvation Army North Western Division; Reverend James Booth, Chair of the Liverpool Methodist District and Reverend Ian Smith, Ecumenical Development Officer and United Reformed Church Minister

Introduction to Mass:

One reason gathers us here in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool, and those of you joining us on BBC Radio 4: it is to say with the shepherds: 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this word that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' That Word is no less than the Word who is God, made flesh and come to abide with us. And the Word is the life, the light that shines in the darkness for all people. The Word is so wonderful, but the darkness of fear so burdensome for many this Christmas, that later in this Mass, Church Leaders in this city will share together the call of our Lord to speak to you words of comfort and peace. And we are certain the darkness shall not overcome the light who is Mary's child: in the name of us all, the choir echoes, in Haydn's Saint Nicholas' setting, the angels' song of the holy, silent night – Glory to God in the highest.

Homily:

'...keeping watch over their flocks by night,' a holy night, a night of magical memories; the night is chosen as the first setting for the heralds of good news of great joy, because Jesus comes into our night. And the word is first proclaimed to shepherds - men of a hard, lonely, not always honest way of life.

The reality we face this Christmas is the threat of a morning after the night before: such a morning that becomes darkest night. The mountain of debt touching families, cities, countries, continents is a terrible hangover and it is night for hundreds of thousands. In this city we are coming to the end of a responsibility, generously and gloriously accomplished, to serve as the European Capital of Culture: 2009 will be very different; we will miss the brightness, the joy, the fun; 2009 may not be easy and at times seem dark.

But, thanks be to God, our Midnight Mass, of receiving the Word of God, of prayer, carols of praise, does not require us to leave the dark outside. For it is a people who walked in darkness who see a great light; on those who lived in a land of deep darkness a light has shined. For within a sustained tradition of service to those in darkness, Major Marion Drew, Commander of the Salvation Army North Western Division, assists us to know some of the valleys of darkness.

Major Marion Drew, Commander of the Salvation Army North Western Division:

‘Valleys of darkness exist physically and metaphorically but this year we are more aware of them. Many of us today have never experienced social and economic darkness on such a scale – but now face the darkness of financial uncertainty as never before, the evidence of violence in our community, and the oppression of debt. To make a difference in our world, our priorities will need to be based on a different set of values.

‘One of God’s first inventions was light – He knows can’t fix everything ourselves. Into our neighbourhood He sends His light, which darkness can never put out.’

Archbishop Kelly continues:

‘For God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him.’ Across the centuries the thrill of such new life coming as a pure gift beyond all deserving, has filled many with the Spirit causing them to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making melody to the Lord; and none more so than the brothers John and Charles Wesley: to that grace, bringing salvation to all, the Reverend James Booth, Chair of the Liverpool Methodist District now testifies:

Reverend James Booth, Chair of the Liverpool Methodist District:

‘We say, do we not, that Christmas is for the children. And, of course, it is. But not just for the children. We celebrate this night the love of God for every man, woman and child who has ever, or will ever, live. We celebrate God’s gift of Himself for all humanity, for all creation, for all time – in Jesus, His Son. God is come to us in a way that we can understand – a child is born. As we follow Him, life is transformed; life makes sense. We find purpose, meaning and direction. Tonight, hope for all is born.’

Archbishop Kelly continues:

But the Holy Spirit, by whose working comes all life, all holiness, is not magic or overwhelming force: this night the tone of the voice of God is revealed as a baby's cry. A crying that invites us day by day to renewal, repentance, reform, for a Saviour has been born for us, who is Christ the Lord, come to set us free. From hardness of heart, from all in us that oppresses others, all within us that is the seed of bitterness and war, to healing and reconciliation the Prince of Peace calls us. The Reverend Ian Smith, Liverpool's Ecumenical Development Officer, Minister in the United Reformed Church, challenges us to open our heart to the Lord's call.

Reverend Ian Smith, Ecumenical Development Officer and United reformed Church Minister:

'Reform, renewal and rebirth are major features of the Christian story. The birth of a baby renews and transforms the life of any family as the love needed for human growth is given and received. The incarnation, the coming of the Son of God as a baby in Bethlehem, was arguably the most transforming event in human history. But incarnation didn't have its last word in Bethlehem. Incarnation happens today and every day, when individual lives, touched by grace, love and forgiveness are transformed: when, to quote a famous carol, The Holy Child of Bethlehem is "Born in us today."

Archbishop Kelly continues:

And this night we rejoice to celebrate not one birth, but two: for Mary 'gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger,' so that in baptism, 'we might receive adoption as children' of God, who has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!' This night brings us new birth in the waters of Baptism and of the Holy Spirit. The Reverend Philip Jump, Baptist Regional Minister, reminds us of the depths of our new life in the Lord.

Reverend Philip Jump, Baptist Regional Minister:

'Some months ago, I bumped into an old friend who is now a minister in rural Wales, working with young and older people to make a real difference in his community. In his late teens he was a drugs dealer on the streets of Anfield, his impact on a local community was quite different from what it is now. But through a transforming encounter with the living Christ, this man was radically changed; he is still a "larger than life" character but his Christian faith is evident for all to see. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, still bringing to birth light, hope, peace and goodwill in the midst of darkness.'

Archbishop Kelly continues:

And the Spirit we have received is that same Spirit that hovered over the formless void and original darkness to accomplish light and beauty: it is the same Spirit who overshadowed the poor, lowly, hungry, Mary of Nazareth and so she conceived and gave birth to the Son of God, the Light of the World. And that Holy Spirit in our heart enables us to be those who do not destroy, and despoil and devour the earth, but enjoy and respect and renew the earth. So this night's song promises nothing less than peace on earth. Bishop James Jones, the Bishop of Liverpool, opens up for us the breadth of this promise.

The Right Reverend Bishop James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool:

'Last Christmas BBC television staged the Nativity on the streets of Liverpool. Thousands of people came out to see scouse shepherds worship at the feet of the infant Christ. And to hear angels with scouse accents sing: 'Glory to God in the Highest and peace on earth.' 2000 years ago they had no idea what we know today – just how troubled and traumatised the earth would become with pollution and poverty. God knows the earth needs saving - from us! And that we too need saving – from ourselves! The earth is His, and everything in it including us. He loves it all. Without Him we have no future and no peace. Liverpool, Europe, the whole world – our common future depends on God's promise to the whole earth.'

Archbishop Kelly concludes:

A dark night but to be transformed into a holy night; the promise not that the hangover of the morning after the night before of excess, will soon be healed by some sparkling, fizzy quick fix of a drink, so that happy days are here again. But a morning after the night before that will be healed by wisdom, transparency, integrity, selflessness, generosity, the joy of self-giving.

And Liverpool will walk on with hope from it's year as European Capital of Culture in the conviction: the secret of the success of 2008 was that spirit which made the city deserve the praise of Jesus: 'I was a stranger and you made me welcome.'

The Saviour born this night makes it possible for us to ensure there is room in the inn for the asylum seeker, those sick, troubled in body, mind, spirit, those wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, for families fearful this night for loved ones in the theatres of war, for the prisoners, especially in Walton prison in Liverpool with whom, in the name of all the Church Leaders, I will celebrate Christmas morning. We shall be those for whom and through whom: the day dawns and the morning star arises in hearts and we wait and hasten a new heaven and a new earth, where goodness, justice, love and truth are at home.

Words before Communion:

This night we, the Church Leaders of Liverpool, have deliberately chosen to do what we can to speak a united word of secure comfort. That is testimony to a journey of growing unity between the followers of the Lord Jesus. But as we now come to the time of Holy Communion we will deeply feel the disunity that persists. We ask you, wherever you are, to be one with us in doing two things: give thanks for a journey begun; and, in that assured thanksgiving, pray that we shall discern the way of the Lord to ever deeper unity that we may be a more effective sign and instrument of Our Lord's peace for our fragmented world.

Ends**24 December 2008**