



Christmas Eve Midnight Mass

Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Saturday 25 December 2021
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

The story of the birth of Jesus with which we are so familiar (and which we have just listened to in the gospel reading this evening) comes from the gospel of Saint Luke. The Gospel of Saint Matthew tells of the birth of Jesus in a much simpler way while both the Gospel of Saint Mark and the gospel of St John do not dwell on the details of the birth of Jesus at all.

Perhaps the reason for Saint Luke's detailed treatment of the birth of Jesus can be found in the title of a book about the gospel of Saint Luke written by a well-known Australian scripture scholar, Father Brendan Byrne. The title of this book is *The Hospitality of God*. Father Byrne would see this title as expressing the heart of the mystery of God as it is made known to us through Saint Luke's Gospel.

Perhaps at Christmas time, more than at any other time of the year, we can understand just how important and how life-giving genuine hospitality is, either because we try so hard to be hospitable towards others or because we benefit so much from the hospitality of others towards us. For many people, of course, the opposite sadly is true: so many experience the lack of warmth and hospitality in their lives as a constant and painful reality, made more difficult to bear at this time of the year.

Whatever our own situation might be, we all long for and appreciate the gift of hospitality, the gift of a warm welcome, the gift of acceptance. It is precisely this, according to Saint Luke's Gospel, which Jesus reveals as the very heart of God's relationship with us, his people. God reaches out to us in love, with compassion and with mercy, in generosity and large-heartedness. This is the very essence of the Christmas story. It was also, of course, the experience of every person who encountered Jesus in the course of his early life. All those who met Jesus with an open heart knew that they were loved by him.

It is, therefore, quite distressing to realise that, from the very beginning, the hospitality of God made known in Jesus is met by the inhospitable response of God's people. Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary are forced to uproot themselves and travel from their hometown to Bethlehem in order to fulfil a government demand for a census of the people. And when they arrive in Bethlehem, city of the famous King David and the place believed to be the birthplace of the coming



Messiah, Mary and Joseph can find no place to stay. No one welcomes them, no one makes room for them, and they are forced to take shelter in a stable: it is there, in poverty and simplicity, and in a certain sense in a situation of rejection and isolation, that the one who is *“mighty God and Prince of peace”* enters into his world.

Although the city of Bethlehem does not welcome its king, the shepherds out in the fields do. In some strange way they experience the presence of the angels announcing the birth of the Messiah and they rush into the city to welcome the one whom the city itself and its people ignored.

Perhaps because of their poverty and simplicity the shepherds, who would have been uneducated people, were more open to recognise the presence of God in unexpected ways. It would have been inconceivable to the rich, the powerful and the privileged, that God would choose to come among his people in this obscure and humble way. As members of God’s chosen people, however, they should have known better. In the sacred writings of the Jewish people which also form part of our Christian Bible, God had reminded them that *“my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways”* (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Tonight, as we gather to celebrate this amazing truth - that the mighty God comes among us in humility, simplicity and poverty - perhaps we, too, are being invited to look again for the presence of the Lord not just in the places we might expect but also in the places that at first glance might seem very unlikely to us. The revelation of the coming of God to his people was first made known to a young unmarried girl in the small town of Nazareth. It was then made known to the poor, marginalised shepherds outside Bethlehem. And throughout the life of Jesus the same pattern repeated itself: the wealthy, privileged and powerful people were unable to recognise the presence of God in Jesus. It was the simple, the humble and the hopeful, who were able to see in him the face of the mercy of God.

God stands knocking at the door of every human heart, waiting in hope for the door to be opened so that he might enter in and sit down with his people, offer his hospitality to them and receive from them the hospitality of their openness to him. Unlike the doors of that Inn in Bethlehem, may the doors of our hearts and our lives be open to him this Christmas.