



MONDAY DECEMBER 24 2001

Leading article

Bread of life

'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem' (Luke ii, 15)

When in 1840 Frederick Oakeley translated the Latin hymn, *Adeste fideles*, for the congregation of Margaret Chapel in London's West End, he gave us one of our best loved Christmas hymns, *O come all ye faithful!* At its centre is the theme of Incarnation, the wonder of the God who gives Himself freely into human life, who stoops in humility to be born as one of us. It is that astonishing reality that causes the armies of angels to fill the heavens with their praises, and draws shepherds from guarding their flocks in the cold fields to find a young mother and her newborn child laid in the pricking straw of a feeding trough for animals.

The ikons of the East and the music, the art, the cribs and the mystery plays of the West are prayers of the Christian imagination which draw us to worship. Rise to adore the mystery of love, which hosts of angels chanted from above. The insistent invitation to the shepherds is an invitation to us also, *O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem.*

Bethlehem was the City of David. When the Gospels of Matthew and Luke locate the birth of Jesus there it was to affirm His identity as the promised Messiah, the one who fulfilled the longing hope for deliverance of the people of God.

When the Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity in the 4th century he built a church at Bethlehem on the site of the present Church of the Nativity to mark the place where Jesus was born, and still in that church pilgrims descend to the cave at its heart where a silver star bears the words "Jesus Christ was born here."

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Christianity is a faith rooted in a particular time and a particular place. At its heart are not speculative ideas about ultimate reality, but God revealing and showing Himself to us in the fragility of a human life. God addresses us in the only language which makes sense to us, the language of a vulnerable, self-giving love.

The Creator chooses to be one with His creation, to be carried in the womb and brought to birth. The imaginative wonder which understandably and necessarily surrounds the Christmas story springs entirely from the discerning of that love's meaning in the life, the teaching, the healing ministry, and above all the death and the triumph over death of that child born at Bethlehem.

In Matthew's account of Jesus's birth, in which the homage of the eastern astrologers, later transmuted into kings, is a central theme, that visit of the Magi is followed by the Massacre of the Innocents, and the Holy Family fleeing as refugees to Egypt. Jesus relives exodus and exile and so fulfils the history of the people of God.

This year, as we celebrate Christmas, we cannot do so without being aware of the darkness and evil of which human beings are capable, and of which what happened on September 11 is a potent symbol.

The conflict of light and darkness, good and evil, is all too evident. So too is the present reality of Bethlehem in a land at the heart of bitter conflict.

God chose to come to us not in tinsel but in the travail of human suffering, and lived out the way of love to the point of being nailed to a cross. That love, that life, so lived is a life that is offered to us, the love of Jesus Christ, which is triumphant over death and which alone has the power to transform human hatred and human sin into the love which feeds the hungry, shelters the refugee, and confronts violence and power with humility and service.

Bethlehem means “the house of bread” and so it is that generations of Christians have found their Bethlehem in the broken bread of the Eucharist and have known the heart and the strength of Christmas in the worship of the Midnight Mass at which the child in the manger is the bread of life given into our hands to feed us and into our lives to transform us. *O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!*