



THE ARCHDIOCESE of BIRMINGHAM

Ethnic Chaplaincies

Christmas and the Holy Family: 25th /26th December

Reflection / Homily – Mgr Daniel McHugh

"I bring you news of great joy: a Saviour has been born for us, Christ the Lord"

It is wonderful to be celebrating Christmas Eve Mass back in the Parish where I was Parish Priest for seventeen years. The readings for Christmas Midnight Mass are full of joy and light in a time when there has been so much pessimism and gloom in the news at home and abroad.

Each week I get together in a zoom call with Parishioners of St George and St Teresa: Dr Ian Morgan and Professor Damian Walmsley who work with me to assemble a VLOG "Burning Bush". My cousin Con produces the total package which includes my weekly Reflection/Homily and it goes onto YouTube and Facebook. Ciaran Page records an opening hymn tune for me because I repeat the Reflection in a livestream Mass on Sundays.

This week we have a wonderful painting which provides the background to the reading of the Psalm on Burning Bush: it is the Nativity by Peter Paul Rubens which is one of thirty-nine paintings he did for the ceilings of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp.

The painting of the Nativity is oval-shaped and because of the perspective from below the figures of the Shepherds on one side and Mary and Joseph on the other seem to be leaning toward the Child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (I advise you to search for it on the internet). Father Ernest Ferlita SJ in his book "The Paths of Life" led me to this painting and he writes "Mary bends towards the Child with tender love and Joseph lifts his right hand as if to say, Look, here he is. Their faces and the faces of the four Shepherds are alive with light, Mary's especially. Where is the light coming from? From the Christ Child, and from him alone."

Above the scene of the Child, Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds, are Angels with a banner carrying the words "Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis" (Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will). We are drawn with the Angels into the scene too, drawn to the Christ Child who is the "true light". The Church prays to God in the Collect from Mass at 'Midnight' "grant, we pray, that we, who have known the mysteries of his light on earth, may delight in his gladness in heaven."

Reading the outcome of research on religious attitudes recently I was surprised at how strong belief in Angels is in an otherwise secular world. You may have heard of the Knife Angel Sculpture created by artist Alfie Bradley at the British Ironworks Centre in Oswestry. It is some 27 feet high and incorporates 100,000 knives; it is being taken around the country to promote the anti-aggression message that is behind its construction, especially the impact of knife crime on society, the victims, the families and friends. The face of the Angel looks down in sheer despair at the horror of violence. We

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look on this little family in the Bethlehem crib scenes of our Churches, seeking to learn from the lives of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and the ideal they set before us, as we celebrate Christmas together: thinking of, praying for loved ones gone, and cherishing those who are with us.

We are reminded too of the dangers to the family from so many directions at home and abroad. In these days where we are very conscious of refugees seeking a new life and how that impacts on families, we are reminded that Mary, Joseph and the Child Jesus were refugees from King Herod, fleeing to Egypt.

In our Burning Bush VLOG the second picture moves on from the Rubens painting to one by Elsheimer “The Flight into Egypt”. The light and joy of the Birth of Jesus is balanced by the darkness depicted by Elsheimer in this Flight for the life of their Child by Mary and Joseph. The Feast of the Holy Family (26th December) has two fixed readings each year but there are three different Gospels for the different years of the cycle. I have chosen to focus on Year A, the Flight into Egypt, so relevant for our times.

There is a danger that so many see the Christmas story as a fairytale for children. No, it is the story of God becoming Man, to bring light to darkness, to show us adults also the Way, the Truth, the Life.

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