

Christmas Day Sermon –

Now I am one of you.



11th cent Fresco, Church of St Nicholas of the Roof, Cyprus

There is a beautiful detail in St Luke's description of the birth of Jesus (*Lk 2.7*) where it is said that Mary 'wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger'. It is the moment that every parent longs for throughout any pregnancy: seeing the face of the one who has been so intimate a part of their lives and yet until now hidden. Truth be known at every birth parents long for it and fear it. It is a moment of truth. It will be a face that will be with you a lifetime. And what mother would wrap their new-born, and recline them in even the poorest bed, without first lifting the child and taking a long and wondering look into that face, hoping for those tightly closed eyes to open? Mary was the first to see the face that would address the whole world with the word and love of God. In that moment before he was laid in the crib 'she saw him who was the manifestation of the living God!' (Guardini, *The Rosary*). A divine mystery hidden at the heart of what is most common and concerns everyman: being born, wrapped for protection, and nursed at a mother's breast. Mary's knowing gaze was possible because of her faith. Because she believed that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled. Because faith recognizes the presence of God in everyday life, especially in helplessness and vulnerability.

And tonight in every virus-torn nation on earth, and those few that might be free of it – among the rich, among the poorest, in hospitals, prisons and refugee camps – men and women are celebrating this birth. This Feast is *always* what it has *always* been: a great sign of the love of God in the midst of the often *painful* and always *precarious* conditions of our lives.

We are living through a restless and worried time when it is hard to believe in the love of God for the world. What we believe and what we experience don't seem to fit together, and many even Christian believers are siding with the confusion and anxiety. But the face of the Incarnate God which was first revealed to Mary that night calls for our faith and trust instead, for which we need to use our hearts rather than our minds. We will need to be ready for our ideas of God, and of love, to be changed if we want to grow in faith.

Perhaps some of you know the astounding story of St Damian the Leper (1840-89), a Belgian priest who became a pastor and missionary isolated in a major leper colony in Hawaii in the late 19th century, before there was a known cure. One day, inadvertently putting his leg into scalding water he had no sensation, and he knew (after 11 years of priestly ministry among the lepers who lived in an atrocious condition) he too had become a leper. He is said to have begun his next sermon, 'Now I am one of you', and for the remaining four years of his life he addressed them, 'we lepers'. That is not just inspiring, especially in the time of a virus which touches us all. But it is a parable of the incarnation. Jesus the Son of God, with his uplifted face, addresses us as he did his virgin

mother, 'We humans: now I am one of you.' How could it be otherwise if God is indeed love and mercy itself?

Not everyone in the New Testament saw that face, and perhaps you remember Jesus's words to Thomas, 'Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet believe'? But one who did see him, through eyes of faith and often through tears, St Peter, says this to us – and I leave it with you as a motto to hold onto, daily, in the coming months while we learn the unity and compassion that only God's charity brings: 'Though you have not seen him, you love him ... you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and heavy with glory, obtaining already the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls' (*1 Pet 1.8*).