

Mass Readings: Isaiah 9:1-6, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14.

I remember, a few years ago, a lady telling me of an extraordinary meeting she had recently had at a Christmas party. It wasn't a party she had wanted to go to at all because of the terrible grief she was in, just having lost her husband tragically in a car accident a month previously. It was difficult also because it wasn't a party where she knew anyone particularly well, but it was to do with a project she was helping to promote through her work and she felt it was expected that she attend. She had gone to the party with a friend, and while the friend had gone to get her a drink, she sat waiting at a table by herself. The room was full of people standing and chatting, and she said that at that moment she had never felt so alone. She couldn't stop the tears coming into her eyes and falling down her cheeks. She looked up and across the large crowded and noisy room she noticed a man trying to catch her attention. He was in a wheel-chair, and was obviously living with quite serious learning difficulties. He caught her eye and smiled at her. He pointed at her, and then slowly, deliberately and with difficulty, drew two of his fingers from his eyes down his cheeks indicating that he had noticed her crying. Then he put his hand to his lips and blew her a kiss across the crowded room. Just for that moment, she said, all her sadness dissolved, and she felt that she was understood. Then her friend returned and after a moment or two she turned round to see the man so as to ask who he was but he was gone, having just been wheeled away by a relative. But that moment and that memory she said would never leave her and stay with her for the rest of her life.

She told me that for that one moment it felt like they were the only two people in the room. Everything, and everyone, including her sadness had been momentarily swallowed up in this man's smile and warmth, his notice of her – his presence to her. In this man she had met someone whose obvious frailties and difficulties, rather than being simply a handicap for him had given him a sensitivity to her, an ability to be present to her, to see her – even for a passing moment, only seconds - to meet and console her, though not a word had passed between them, but only a glance and a smile, and a kiss. Our frailties can hurt us but they can also ennoble us and dignify us and expand us and deepen us – make us aware. In that they can be a gift. No one else in the room knew of this lady's hurt, no one there saw the kiss blown her across the room. An exchange was taking place of which everyone else was,

quite naturally, totally unaware; but this woman, the receiver of the gift of someone else's presence said that that encounter would stay in her memory for ever.

“Though He was in the form of God Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.” So St. Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians.

But no one knew. This wonderful exchange between our God and the human condition took place and for the most part was lived through in total obscurity.

“Who is this man – even the wind and sea obey Him?”

“Where did He get all this wisdom and these special powers? Isn't He the carpenter's son, and aren't His Mother His brothers and sisters all here with us? Where did He get all this?” And they found Him offensive. So writes St Matthew in his gospel.

What we celebrate tonight is that in this human condition of ours, where we pass our busy days, and in which we often hide the burden of our more secret lives, we are seen – by One like us. Through all our conversations, through all that goes on around us, across the long expanse of our days, the vast busy room of our lives, Someone always uniquely notices us. Christmas proclaims that He has already shared everything of our human condition. In the simplicity of the stable, the anonymity of Nazareth village life with its joys and sorrows, in the tiredness of public ministry, the humiliation and ridicule of others, the loss of trusted friends, the pain of the cross – and its victory, God has caught our eye. The humanity of God in Jesus Christ, this emptying of Himself that Paul refers to in order to be near us, is His kiss uniquely blown to you across a noisy crowded room, where you might feel no one sees or hears or understands you, but Someone does. It's not simply that someone does but who that Someone is. Christmas celebrates that God is with us. *“And He shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us.”*

Like the guests at the Christmas party we have no idea of the meeting going on in our midst;

that between Christ and our world. I have no idea of the passion with which I individually am loved, the completeness with which I am understood, the sheer delight with which I am cherished, by God. I have no idea of the depth of longing and the devotedness with which He yearns to catch my eye, win my heart, and secure my love. Because of what we remember on this holy night there is in my room, my heart, my soul, my life, my humanity Someone who for ever wants to catch my eye, and amid the noise and conflicts, and beneath all that may hurt or confuse, across that room, smile and blow a kiss of love which is uniquely for me, that I am seen, and understood. I have no idea what a price has been paid for me, what a journey has been made for me.

When you go home tonight I want each of you to do something, and I pass this on to you from the Lord. Go apart, alone, for five minutes. It doesn't matter where – anywhere. Become still, look within, know that He sees you – across all that has made up this year, and many years, across the crowded room He throws His arms and takes you to Himself, into His heart, into His life, knowing all, understanding all, forgiving all, because for Him there is no one like you; never has been, never will be. And in that embrace be at peace.