

CHRISTMAS 2013

I have never been to the Holy Land; my trips overseas always seem to take me to the same places for conferences and study with little time left to explore other parts of the world. Those who have been to the Holy Land speak of the moving experience of going to the places where Jesus walked, literally following in his footsteps, exploring the landscape, imagining what it was like 2,000 years ago as the mystery of the biblical journey of Jesus unfolds. Regardless of our age, Christmas allows our imaginations to run freely; the Christmas story invites us into a place of wonder, enchantment, grace and peace. The biblical images, the Christmas carols, the spirit of generosity, being together with family and friends, feeling tired but also feeling elated, that special something that touches the mystery of the birth of Jesus, in a manger, in a stable, on a journey where shepherds visit, angels sing and wise men from the east are guided by the light of the star.

St Francis of Assisi gave the world its first nativity scene centuries ago. Pope Francis wants us to enter into the mystery of that nativity scene to touch and be touched by the wonder of the Saviour's birth. Pope Francis wants us not just to tell stories and sing songs but to feel the human warmth between Mary and Joseph and Jesus, to smell the scent of a new-born child, to hear the baby's cry and the noise made by the animals, to know that the shepherds who came to visit the new-born child of Bethlehem were probably in their work clothes while the wise men from the East were probably in fine clothing, but there in the stable they all belong, caught up in an awesome, powerful and touching mystery; they came to meet the word-made-flesh, Jesus, the light of the world, the hope of all nations and the Prince of Peace. Here, we gather to celebrate, active participants, called together like those biblical characters to behold the wonder of the Saviour's birth which changed the course of human history.

Yes, it would be nice to one day go to Bethlehem and see for myself. But Pope Francis reminds us that for people of faith, Bethlehem is before us each and every day. When the mystery of faith touches the reality of human existence, there Jesus is born. That's what we mean by the incarnation. I've had a few Bethlehem moments in the last few weeks, events that remind me about the reality and beauty of what we celebrate at Christmas. Watching the children of our two parish schools come together for end-of-year Mass and Graduation ceremonies, remembering, celebrating, praying, singing and giving thanks, that's a Bethlehem moment where Jesus is born in the hearts, minds and

imagination of our young children being formed in faith. Watching volunteers prepare the Monday lunch at St Brendan's for the homeless, working together with members of the local churches, that's a Bethlehem moment where Jesus is born in the ministry of love, compassion and service. Seeing the devastation and total destruction of parts of the Philippines after the typhoon, that's Bethlehem where Jesus is born, even in the hardship and the suffering. A few weeks ago I was called to do something which is always a challenge in the ministry of a priest, baptizing a very sick and fragile child in hospital who is now doing remarkably well. His name is Joseph. As I poured a little tube of water over him and touched him with the oil of chrism, I was conscious that the intensive care area of the hospital became Bethlehem. The birth of Jesus touches our longing, our fears, our joy and our fragility, the laughter and the tears of family life, our dreams, hopes and struggles. Many of you have known Bethlehem moments in the course of this last year. Yes, Jesus was born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. But he is born today in your heart and mine, he is born in our families, our community, in our Church and in our world. And his birth brings hope, joy and peace to our world. And in the words of Pope Francis, this birth propels us forward in faith:

WHEN THE SONG OF THE ANGELS IS STILLED,
WHEN THE STAR IN THE SKY IS GONE,
WHEN THE KINGS AND PRINCES ARE HOME,
WHEN THE SHEPHERDS ARE BACK WITH THEIR FLOCK,
THE WORK OF CHRISTMAS BEGINS:

TO FIND THE LOST,
TO HEAL THE BROKEN,
TO FEED THE HUNGRY,
TO RELEASE THE PRISONER,
TO REBUILD NATIONS,
TO BRING PEACE AMONG BROTHERS AND SISTERS.