

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

19 December 2021

Welcome

Even in Covid times, the things we do at Christmas time are very human and life-affirming: we meet and we exchange greetings and we give gifts. In other words, we make contact with family and friends, we make the effort to connect, even with people we might not see that often.

Topic

It may help to reflect on that before we celebrate the feast next Saturday and in the days that follow.

Steps

Last Christmas was hard under lockdown; this Christmas is also restricted, though not quite as much because of vaccination and immunity. In the last two years, many of us have got used to meeting others virtually, using our phones or computers. Of course, it is not the same. A pal of mine said the difference between meeting on Zoom and meeting in person, is like the difference between a screenshot of pint and being with friend in a pub. Even with the advantages of virtual meeting, we all miss a combination of presence, body language, the energy of collaboration and the spontaneity of being with people. Zoom is good but it is a second best. Nothing quite replaces being with others.

Our Gospel today illustrates in an intense way our human encounters. A successful coming together has three characteristics, what I call the three Rs: to receive, to recognise and to reciprocate. Elizabeth receives Mary, while recognising who she is, in a rich and joyful way. The encounter triggers a prayer in Mary, "My soul glorifies the Lord my spirit rejoices in God my saviour" (not in the reading). Both women are full of joy, in Luke's narrative. They receive each other, they recognise each other and they reciprocate. The encounter is joyful, affirming and refreshing. Something similar happens, somewhat more mysteriously, between the children they are carrying.

Once of my favourite poets, Malcolm Guite has a good reflection on the Visitation:

Here is a meeting made of hidden joys
Of lightnings cloistered in a narrow place
From quiet hearts the sudden flame of praise
And in the womb the quickening kick of grace.
Two women on the very edge of things
Unnoticed and unknown to men of power
But in their flesh the hidden Spirit sings
And in their lives the buds of blessing flower.
And Mary stands with all we call 'too young',
Elizabeth with all called 'past their prime'

They sing today for all the great unsung
Women who turned eternity to time
Favoured of heaven, outcast on the earth
Prophets who bring the best in us to birth

As we look ahead to the coming festivities, with all due care and caution, it is no harm to reflect on what I hope the various gatherings will bring about. Will we find ourselves refreshed and renewed? Will our meeting up with family and friends be life-giving, life-affirming, even joyful? The key is not to rely too much on the externals, fun and important as they are. Instead, we are to receive each other, to recognise each other and we reciprocate. This works, if we really do meet and not just spend time in the same place. It means letting something of our inner world be seen and getting in touch with what is important in the lives of others. It is never too late to learn the three Rs!

Conclusion

An American philosopher of art, Suzanne Langer, once put it like this: some of the deep delight in life comes from entrusting our mud pies to each other's sympathetic consideration. At Christmas we entrust not just our mud pies but ourselves to each other's sympathetic consideration. We that happens, we will all be refreshed, affirmed and restored. You may have noticed a rare omission in my reflection: God! But God is there in the human encounter precisely because the Word become flesh and lived among us. May we feel the quickening kick of grace this Christmas!