Birth of the Christ-Child

We have all heard stories of the “Christmas truce” on parts of the Western Front during World War I when soldiers from opposing sides put down their weapons, buried the dead, fraternised with one another and, according to some reports, played soccer—sorry football!—together.

Even if Pope Benedict XV’s plea “that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang” was officially rebuffed, ordinary soldiers, mainly Christians, took the initiative to celebrate Christ’s birth by
declaring the truce. It was a brief interlude among the bloodshed and horrors of war.

We cannot hear this story without marvelling at the way the human spirit is able to rise above stupidity and depravity. The birth of Christ is a similar story. Jewish people then, as many times since, were in a situation of oppression and violence at the hands of their conquerors. Moreover, Joseph and Mary, in a manner not unlike millions of refugees today, are forced to flee their home for fear of death. They find sanctuary in a stable.

We know the rest of the story with shepherds, wise kings and angels singing. Christ the Messiah is born. There is something more than awakening of the human spirit in this story. Or, rather, the awakening of the human spirit is always a response to God’s enduring presence in our world, despite its often sordid reality. Christmas is the feast that calls us to make a truce—be instruments of peace—in the name of the Christ-child.
Fame, Celebrity and Greatness

We live in a time when fame seems all important. Newspapers and magazines constantly present to us the lives of models, movie-stars, pop idols, sportspersons or members of the royal family as living legends, true celebrities. They are the stars of the universe, the people who have made it to the top of the tree of life. The rest of us are just the also-rans, the leftovers, those who have tried and mostly failed.

Even though we may go along with this charade – after all, we buy and read the newspapers and magazines – we know deep-down that true human greatness has little to do with fame and celebrity. Even Shakespeare’s oft’ quoted piece from Twelfth Night is a less than satisfactory explanation of greatness: “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them.” These words, taken to heart by the love-sick Malvolio from a fabricated letter, deliberately confound ‘greatness’ and ‘foolishness’ … which is much the same as confusing greatness with fame and celebrity.

It is perhaps heartening to know that Jesus’ disciples also failed to understand what it means to be genuinely great. They were so busy arguing among themselves about “which of them was the greatest” – by which they meant status and power – they had completely missed what Jesus had been telling them about his impending death and resurrection. Like the disciples, we too often close our ears to things we do not dare or
want to understand. In some ways, the disciples had turned Jesus into a celebrity preacher about whom they could not bear to hear anything negative. The result: “They did not understand what he said and were too afraid to ask.”

The response of Jesus, in words and actions, is solemn, radical, confronting. His words: “If anyone wants to be first (or great), he must make himself last of all and servant of all.” In other words, true greatness has nothing to do with human egos, fame, power or prestige, but humility, service and love. He then enacts his vision of human greatness by picking up a little child, symbol of weakness and dependence, calling on the disciples to be similarly accepting of the “little ones” and wounded people in our world. This is another illustration of the “great reversal” of Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor, the suffering, the sorrowful and those committed to peace-building and works of mercy. This is true greatness.

Greatness is found in the ordinariness of human life – as in the often near-heroic but barely noticed ongoing love of parents caring for a disabled child, or with those confronting suffering or death with dignity and acceptance. We also know many people with mental illnesses or those whose life-experiences give them every reason for despair. Yet, so often, such people remain hopeful, courageous, prayerful, continuing to live their lives with simple, faith and practical love. These are the “little ones” who teach their fellow humans what it means to be truly human and genuinely great.
Spiritual Revolution

Complaining about life’s woes is a fairly common human experience. We find it in today’s Exodus account of the Israelites wandering in the desert. Although they had been freed from slavery, they now find themselves in search of food and bitterly complaining of their situation to Moses and Aaron. Yet, we also know how the story ends: the Lord sends them heavenly bread, but only after they have been tested to learn the lesson that God does not abandon the chosen people.

“What have you that you have not received?” asks Paul in a letter to the complaining Corinthians. We know we live in a world where so many have legitimate grounds for complaint: people without jobs, housing, education, medical necessities, drinkable water or adequate food. There are some Australians in urban and outback situations who are genuinely without basic human needs to live.
Yet, most of us enjoy more than adequate ‘things’ to live by. Probably, though, we simply accept these ‘gifts of life’ without too much thought about the blessings we have received. Often it is those (of us) who have most who are the least aware of our need to be thankful. Everything we have, including life itself, says Paul, is a precious gift of our Creator.

In today’s letter to the Ephesians, Paul asks us up front: are we still corrupted by illusions? Are our lives taken up with false desires—power, success, money, prestige—to the point that we Christians live an aimless kind of existence that has learnt nothing from Christ? No, says Paul, this is not good enough. Rather, we must undergo a “spiritual revolution” and “put on the mind of Christ” to learn that God’s abundant blessings are everywhere about us.

After feeding of the 5,000, Jesus leads his disciples step by step to a spiritual awakening. He tells them they need to think beyond material things and “work for food that lasts forever”. Most of the disciples remain dumbfounded and ask Jesus for (another) sign. After all, they say, did not Moses give a sign by providing “manna in the desert”? Jesus rebukes this kind of thinking, reminding them it was not Moses but God who gives “bread from heaven”. Jesus then confronts them with his astounding claim: he is the true “bread of life”; and those who come to him will never be hungry.

As disciples, we are called to reassess our lives in light of Jesus’ invitation to enter into living relationship with him. He is the “bread of life” we share in the Eucharist and other sacraments, the one we seek in prayer, the one we find in those most neglected, forgotten and in need. If we remain centred on ourselves and our own little worlds, we will find many things that cause pain and sorrow. If we focus on the ills of the wider world, we will have even more reason for despondency, even despair. Let us rather become spiritually alive to God’s abounding generosity freely given to us. Let us become Christ for others.
The Joy of Being Wrong

You thought you lost your wallet only to find it in the lounge chair! You thought you failed the exam but, to your surprise, passed with a credit! You thought you made enemies with your neighbour, but it turned out to be just a minor misunderstanding! Sometimes, it is good for us to experience being wrong.

Something like this occurred to the disciples after Jesus’ crucifixion. In a situation of despair, they thought all their ideas about Jesus and their hopes for the future were dashed. Then, something remarkable happens: the crucified Jesus appears to various groups of disciples. So extraordinary is this experience, the disciples find it very hard to believe, to admit they were wrong. Perhaps it was a ghost, or someone dressed up pretending to be Jesus.

In today’s Gospel, we find the disciples gathered around to hear the story of Cleopas and an unnamed disciple meeting Jesus on the way to Emmaus: for most of the journey they do not recognise who the stranger is; only when they break bread together do they see it is Jesus; but he immediately disappears from their sight. Sounds pretty fanciful, some of the disciples were saying.
Then Jesus appears in their midst offering his blessing of peace. The disciples immediately go into fear and panic which Jesus addresses by asking: “Why is there fear in your hearts?” He shows them his hands and feet and invites them to touch him to allay their doubts: “A ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have.” Jesus eats with them and explains how his death and rising were predicted in the Scriptures ... as he had already told them, but they were too blind to see. They remember Jesus saying: “O you of little faith!”

The transformation of Jesus from death to life is matched by the transformation of the disciples. Their despair and cowardice in abandoning Jesus give way to the experience of forgiveness and peace. They had been so wrong but, after the initial struggle to believe, cannot hold back their new-found joy. Empowered by Jesus’ healing love and gifts of the Spirit, the disciples go out to share their “good news” to the ends of the earth.

Making wrong decisions and bad judgments is something we all do. It’s called being human. How easy it is to fall into the trap of doubting God’s goodness and mercy because this seems so counter to a world in which suffering and disappointment abound. It seems easier to live without hopes and dreams—and so to shield ourselves from further disillusionment. Yet there is something deeper in our hearts challenging such hard-nosed cynicism.

The Easter story confirms these deepest longings in our human hearts. It does not annul the reality of pain and sorrow, but transforms these into something more wonderful where death no longer reigns. Let us not live our lives as if Jesus had not risen! Like the first disciples, let us experience the joy of being wrong!
We have just celebrated God’s wonderful gift to us in the birth of Jesus at Christmas. Stories of Jesus’ growing up in Nazareth with his parents, Joseph and Mary, are few. Of the Gospel writers, only Luke gives a couple of glimpses into Jesus’ early life and boyhood. On both occasions – once after his birth and the other when he is twelve years old – the stories involve the family trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem, a round-trip distance of over 200 kilometers. According to Luke, the family made this trip every year to celebrate the Jewish Passover.
Today’s Gospel story tells of the family’s first visit to the Jerusalem temple in accordance with “the law of Moses” (Torah) which required every first-born male to be consecrated to the Lord. So, what we know from the very start is that Joseph and Mary are steeped in their Jewish faith and tradition. Everything we learn of Jesus subsequently tells us he imbibed this tradition and lived his life as a pious, law-observing Jew – even if he was to put his own particular stamp on what it meant to be a son of Israel and to follow the Torah.

On this first occasion of Jesus’ presentation in the temple, we are introduced to two aged Israelites, Simeon and Anna, who provide Mary and Joseph with insight into their child Jesus: they speak of him as the one who is sent to save Israel and enlighten the nations. Though, in Simeon’s prophetic words to Mary, there is recognition the child will be a sign of contradiction leading to a sword that will pierce her own heart. All this is played out in the manner that Jesus’ is finally rejected and then crucified in the presence of his mother.

What though do we learn of the family life of Nazareth prior to Jesus embarking on his mission? According to Luke, Jesus lived under the authority of his parents and grew in wisdom with God’s blessing. We know that Joseph was a carpenter, and can probably assume Jesus followed in his footsteps. As for Mary, we are told, she “treasured all these things in her heart” both as Jesus’ mother and, eventually, as his disciple.

In the Catholic tradition, the Holy Family of Nazareth has taken on larger significance. Pope Paul VI referred to this home of Nazareth as the “school of the Gospel” where we learn simplicity, silence, relationship, prayer and forgiveness. Above all, he tells us, Nazareth teaches that family life is a communion of love and, as such, is irreplaceable within the social order.

In this sense, Nazareth is not so much a place as a spiritual attitude. Marist founder, Jean-Claude Colin says: “I place myself in the home of Nazareth: from there I see all that I must do”. Here, we learn to grow in the ways of the Spirit through prayer and silence, fidelity and commitment, as well as in our relationships with parents and siblings, partners and friends, mentors and teachers. The church’s mission is to continue the life of Nazareth for the world.
Where Do We Find God?

One of the first questions in the Penny Catechism is “Where is God?” The answer: “God is everywhere”. As Creator, God is in creation. As Saviour, God is in human history. As Redeemer, God is in every human person. However, the question of God’s ‘whereabouts’, namely ‘everywhere’, is different to the question of our seeing or finding God. How does this everywhere God reveal himself to us?

Scripture tells us Jacob saw God “face to face” (Gen. 32:30) and “God spoke to Moses as a person speaks to a friend” (Exod. 33:11). Indeed, for Christians, Jesus is the very face of God. Yet, we also learn from Exodus, “you cannot see God’s face and live” (33:20) or, from St John, “no one has ever seen God” (1:18).

The paradox here is that God’s presence is most often hidden from our eyes. Isaiah speaks of “a God who lies hidden” (45:12); for St Paul, Christ is “the image of the unseen God” (Col. 1:15). Indeed, Christ as the image, icon or face of God, manifests the divine mystery by taking on our human condition, ‘emptying himself’ of all signs of divinity: “He did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” even to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-11).
There is a story told by Elie Wiesel, a Jewish Auschwitz survivor, who was forced to witness numerous killings of his fellow Jews in the camps. He recalls how a young boy, perhaps 14 years old, hung in agony on a rope, struggling for near-on half an hour before it was over. A prisoner cried out: “Where is God? Where is God now?” Weisel’s response: “I heard a voice within me answer, ’Here he is—he is hanging in the gallows’”.

God is not only present where we least expect him but sometimes where we least want him, in the midst of suffering, evil and terror. How do we cope with an all-loving God in the face of an innocent boy swinging from the gallows? For the Christian, the answer is in the way that God is most fully revealed to us in the image of his own Son, Jesus, hanging from a tree at Calvary.

The question of where we find God is also posed in today’s readings. Elijah thought he would follow Moses for whom God is revealed in storm, wind and fire. However, for Elijah, God is not found in these ways, but in the “still small voice of a gentle breeze” (Kings 19:12). In contrast, Peter comes to believe Jesus is “the Son of God” through his experience of nearly drowning. Like us, he is a person of “little faith” who meets the God of Jesus in a situation of distress. God reveals himself to each of us according to our own particular experiences.

There is no human experience from which God is absent. Yet, our faith is constantly tested, like Elijah and Peter, that we may find this hidden God in places we least expect or even want to find him.
The Risen Jesus and the Spirit of Truth

What keeps the disciples going after the death and resurrection of Jesus? Initially, the disciples experience the risen Jesus appearing to them. Certainly this is the same Jesus who, in his risen state, walks, talks and eats with his disciples; he invites them to see and touch him. Yet, the risen Jesus does not seem bound by time and space in the manner of ordinary beings. Mark tells us he appears in another form (16:12); sometimes, as in the Emmaus story, Jesus is not immediately recognisable.

However, what is recognisable is the manner in which the disciples themselves are empowered by these appearances of the risen Jesus. Their lives are changed from despair and cowardice to faith and courage. Jesus who was crucified is now somehow present to them in a new way.
They begin to understand that his death is the source of life, peace and forgiveness for all ... or, in the words of Peter, “in his body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life” (1 Pet 3:18).

Nonetheless, these heady days in which the risen Jesus appears to his disciples, leading them from despair to hope, are coming to an end. Jesus tells them he is returning to the Father but, he adds, “I will not leave you orphans” (Jn 14:18). In particular, he promises them he will send “another Advocate” who is “the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:16). More than an advocate who may plead our cause, this is the Holy Spirit, counsellor, comforter, enabler, divine lover, who comes from God and leads us to God.

Moreover, it is this Spirit who keeps us in relationship with the risen Jesus—and keeps us faithful to the mission he began. Even before Pentecost, we hear today of Philip’s mission to the people of Samaria: he not only proclaims Christ and heals the sick but, with the assistance of Peter and John, prays for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit. The apostles soon find that “the world” which rejected Jesus will be equally hostile to the Spirit. Stephen had already been stoned to death; in time, the apostles would suffer a similar fate.

The work and mission of Jesus continue in the life of the Church and the lives of Christians everywhere. Jesus’ words in his “farewell discourse” focus on the power of love and the promise of the Holy Spirit. However, there is nothing here that assures success in worldly terms. Still, like the apostles and first disciples, we are called in the manner of Jesus: “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you” (Jn 20:21).

According to Pope Francis, our call is to be “missionary disciples” whose concern is the transformation of the world rather than the church’s own preservation. Moreover, he makes clear the missionary vocation is the responsibility of every Christian. This will involve significant changes in the way the church operates ... but, most importantly, it demands that Christians, inspired by the Spirit, are filled with “the joy of the Gospel” through their personal encounter with the risen Christ.
Friends, Enemies and Strangers

How easy it is to divide our world and relationships into three broad categories of friends, enemies and strangers. We love the first, hate the second and ignore the third. This may seem a perfectly reasonable way of behaving. However, it is not what Scripture nor Jesus teaches: “You must love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus); “You must love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you” (Jesus); “You must also love the stranger” (Deuteronomy) and “give to anyone who asks” (Jesus).

If all this didn’t seem difficult enough, Jesus then tells us to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”. At this point, most of us feel like the rich
young man in Jesus’ parable. He wanted to do the right thing but, in the end, felt Jesus was asking too much—and so walked sadly away. But that is the thing with love; it always asks much more of us than we are able to give. Yet, if we give ourselves over to love of God and others, we find our lives transformed. For most of us, this is not something that happens overnight, but a life process.

So, where to begin this journey of love? We might start by giving more attention to our families and friends. This is a first lesson, learning that even our love for those who love us is often found wanting. Yet the love of family and friends, however imperfect, teaches us we can never deserve—let alone earn—the love of others. It was once said, the human person needs much more love than anyone deserves. Love is always a gift, both given and received. Most of us learn this reality in the context of family and intimate relationships; in turn, we are asked to pass this love onto others.

Secondly, we have all experienced unjust situations where people have misunderstood, ignored or abused us. Here is the enemy, either real or imagined. In any case, we all carry hurt and pain as part of the human journey. The challenge is to learn the seemingly impossible lesson of forgiveness. Jesus’ prayer—“Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34)—reminds us that none of us is totally innocent of hurting others. Moreover, only to the extent we learn to forgive others are we free to accept the love and forgiveness of others.

Love of stranger carries with it the strong social justice message of the Scriptures. St Augustine asks the question: “What does love look like?” His answer: “It has hands to help others; it has feet to hasten to the poor and needy; it has eyes to see misery and want; it has ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of others”. The Scriptures often speak of hospitality for the stranger and table-fellowship with the poor and marginal. St. Augustine also said God loves each of us as if we were the only one. This is the way we are being asked to learn the lesson of love for friend, enemy or stranger.