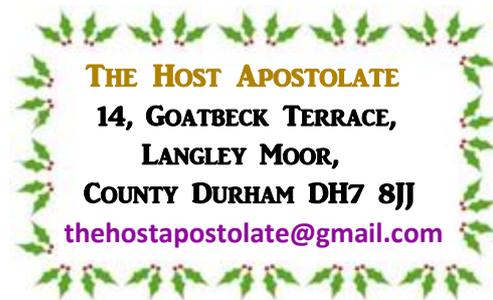


Encouragement Encouragement

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A GIFTED CHRISTMAS



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I always look forward especially to the Christmas issue of Encouragement as usually there is room for some more artistry. Perhaps this year it will be a little different? Advent is a time of preparations for the coming of Jesus both at Christmas and in a deeper way a time of preparation for that ultimate ‘second coming’ and a yearning for a true home coming for all people of every ‘nation, race, tribe and language’ (Apocalypse 7:9-14). We celebrate for there is much to celebrate, and do so as appropriate, with those we love, families, friends and communities. The birth of any child is a wonderful event – a moment of pure joy for a new life has begun with its unknown future and difficulties. Questions arise as to what this child will be?

Did they not ask the same question when John the Baptist was named by his father Zachariah and regained his voice? Were they not astonished at his recovery...

(Luke 1: 66).

The Child that was born to Mary and Joseph was a child like no other. Yes, Jesus cried, needed to be kept warm, changed and fed. But the future of the human race was born into the arms of a gentle woman, a young mother and nurtured by Joseph. Both descended from the royal house of David - a sign of His Kingship, and a pointer to those who knew the scripture, prophets and teachers, that this was no ordinary child, but the long awaited Messiah – the Saviour. This child, as Simeon said, would be the ‘rise and fall of many in Israel’ and bring sorrow to Mary as a sword would pierce her motherly heart. (Luke 4:35.)

These facts alone should make us ponder the significance of Christmas with its many cultural expressions from Christmas trees to cakes, ‘visitations’ presents, decorations and parties. While bringing

some joy these never quite do justice to the event itself. Some traditions, which at least underpin the story have been abandoned and lost in the mists of time. One example of this is the setting of an extra place at table in case Jesus and family called, in the guise of strangers seeking shelter. Another example is the laying of some straw under the tablecloth to remind us of the stable in Bethlehem. Maybe the giving of gifts is still in place but do we associate them with the three wise men, Magi in some places, celebrated by gift giving at the Epiphany, now too almost lost. There is a tradition of singing Carols at home or around the crib to centre on the event now

restricted only to churches and fund-raising events. All things of Joy are from the Lord and I do not wish to imply that of themselves celebrations are not good as often they bring people together, though of course for some, it is also a time of loneliness and strife.



Yet this year Christmas may yet prove to be the greatest gift of all to all of us. Yes, this year we may not be able to celebrate it as before. As I write this Encouragement a few weeks before the next month’s (December) is due I write with a certain degree of uncertainty as to what Christmas will be like this year, or will ‘Covid’ strike with ever deepening sorrow into people’s hearts, fraught minds and intentions. All is yet unknown and as I write we are, as many countries in the world are, in ‘lockdown’ with the restrictions placed on normal interaction, shopping visits, entertainment and yes, very crucially, access to Churches and Sacraments.

We have had to use new terms – ‘lockdown’ being one... It has a feel of a closing down or a shutting off, as well as ‘self-isolate’, ‘social distance’ – which are all essentially negative terms. Whereas Christmas is the converse of this: the start of a freeing of people from external oppression and the liberation of spirit...

**“Friends, I greet you and those dear to you. I bless you and encourage you not to grow faint as you travel the right road.”
St Pope John Paul II.**

Writing for the unknowable future is a particular challenge, therefore. But there is quite another way of approaching Christmas this year regardless of how free we will be to celebrate it together. Is it not true that the *'First Christmas was probably like the one we may be called to share this year'*... The little family was isolated from their community- in Nazareth, they were among strangers with nowhere to stay. They travelled on a donkey so probably did not have many things with them to remind them of family. Many families this year will have a frugal time, with the loss of jobs and or income. Many may not be able to visit loved ones and families will be separated.

Instead of a return home the little Nazareth family had to travel onwards into the unknown. Here we also think of those dispossessed by war. We too do not know how things will work out for all of us- not only in terms of the loss of loved ones but also illness and isolation and loneliness.

What we may have wanted to do or planned may not be possible. How long did Joseph and Mary have to wait to present Jesus in the temple? Will we too have to wait to see if we can have Mass or services at Christmas?

Now we can grieve over the losses and become even more despondent and understandably so, but let us consider whether all this may yet be a *GIFT* for us. As Christians we must follow the Master and become like Him. We must enter into the mystery of God who became man so that we could imitate Him. Could it not be a time for us to truly follow Him into the stable, into a journey into hardship and be blessed by it, as we deepen our realisation of what Christmas was really about. Could it yet be the greatest gift as we offer our little joys and sorrows to His Father and pray for all those who may be in even more difficult circumstances than ourselves. There are those who have no shelter, are persecuted, afraid grieving, and for whom tomorrow is very uncertain. Did not the Holy Family have to live like this?

Gift... Yes, this Christmas without some of the externalities may yet be a special time with a gift of inner Joy and anticipation that may be so needed at this time. Could it be a time to revitalise what it is that we celebrate? Could we consider what are the most important things for us as Christians and

Human beings. Jesus was as man, a human being and had many sufferings. Can we discover this year the depth of what it means to follow the Master and live out our calling with pure Joy regardless of restrictions?

I pray and hope that this Christmas will be the best that you ever had. Blessings to everyone.

Halina Holman

Pope Francis

"Advent has a special charm, it makes us experience deeply the meaning of history. In Advent we rediscover the beauty of all being on a journey ... across the paths of time. The season of Advent restores ... a hope which does not disappoint for it is founded on God's Word. A hope which does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints! ... Let us think about and feel this beauty. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by [Mary this Advent], she who is mother, a mamma and knows how to guide us. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by her during this season of active waiting and watchfulness."

Rome 2014



**And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With Painful step and slow,
Look up! For glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing.
Oh, rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing.
Amen.**

From the Carol 'It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.'

Feast Days in December

3rd St. Francis Xavier, 4th St. John Damascene

6th **Second Sunday of Advent**

7th St. Ambrose

8th **The Immaculate Conc. of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

12th **Our Lady of Guadalupe**

St. Jane Frances de Chantal

13th **Third Sunday of Advent: Gaudete!**

14th St. John of the Cross

20th **Fourth Sunday in Advent**

21st St. Peter Canisius, 23rd St. John of Kanty

25th **Nativity of the Lord, Christmas Day**

26th St. Stephen

27th (Sunday) **The Holy Family**

28th The Holy Innocents

29th St. Thomas a Becket

31st St. Pope Sylvester

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