

TURNING FEAR INTO FAITH: 4TH SUNDAY ADVENT A

Believe it or not, there are people who fear and even dread the approach of Christmas. The source of their fear and dread is not the religious side of things. It comes from other factors.

For some it's the hustle and bustle, the hassle and extra work that makes them afraid. For some it's the strain put on their already overstretched finances by the Christmas splurge. For others it's the fear of the conflicts and squabbles that sometimes erupt in families at Christmas time. For others still it's because Christmas brings back awful memories – of a death or tragedy that happened around Christmas time.

Also, where there has been a loss during the past year, that loss is felt again, felt intensely at Christmas. The sight of others surrounded by happy loved ones reopens a wound that was starting to heal. The result is an intense loneliness. Finally one's fears may come from getting older, with all the weaknesses, restrictions, and sense of mortality that growing old brings with it. As one old Passionist I knew, when I was young myself, kept saying to another old Passionist: 'Isn't old age pathetic?'

But those who fear the approach of Christmas can take heart and hope from the story of the first Christmas. There was plenty of fear around then too. In fact, all of the main characters in the Christmas story were afraid at one time or another, and in one way or another.

Joseph was afraid when he found that Mary was expecting a child even though they hadn't lived together or had sex. But an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him in words we hear in our gospel today: 'Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit.' Joseph, that just man, trusted God, and so overcame his fear and did what was respectful and right.

Mary was afraid when she heard the greeting of the angel Gabriel. But the angel said to her, 'Mary, don't be afraid, you have won God's favour.' The angel went on to tell her that she was to conceive and bear a son by the power of the Holy Spirit, and she must name him 'Jesus', i.e. 'Saviour'. Mary trusted God, and so overcame her fear when she said 'Yes' to everything God was asking of her.

The shepherds too were afraid. The gospel tells us that when the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were terrified. But the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy ... Today a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.' The shepherds too trusted God, went over to Bethlehem, saw the Child, and went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God.

All of us are affected by fear. But we must not let our fears cripple us. What we have to do is to move from fear to faith. What empowers us to turn fear into faith is trust. And this is where Christmas can be a mighty help, because at Christmas it can be easier to trust in God than at any other time. This is because we feel that God is very close to us and very loving towards us at this time. In Jesus, God comes to us in the form of a child. And surely no one can be afraid of a child, unless, of course, a particular child is a brat! (Brats can be very scary)!

Christmas challenges us to enter into an intimate relationship with God who is Love itself. It challenges us to keep trusting that we will receive love, and keep on receiving love, from God and others.

By all means, let us do whatever we can to improve our situations. But having done what we can to make life better, let us leave in the hands of God what is outside or beyond our control.

Our fears, then, can be an opportunity, even a grace. They can lead us to courageously put our trust in God rather than in ourselves. Loneliness too can be a grace. In every human heart there is deep down an empty room waiting for a guest. That Guest is God. So, this Christmas, should we be feeling alone and lonely, don't be afraid or alarmed. Christmas wakes up our deepest longings, longings which God alone can and will satisfy. So, in short, let us not allow our fears stop us from opening our hearts to that 'good news of great joy' announced to the shepherds by the angel at the first Christmas - the good news that God is truly with us, always with us!

bgleesoncp@gmail.com