

# Homily at Christmas Midnight Mass 2004

## The Most Reverend Kevin McDonald, Archbishop of Southwark

Christmas is a time of celebration and precisely for that reason is, in some ways, a time of contradictions. We have to acknowledge that, for some, this Christmas will be a difficult and a lonely time, and that may indeed be heightened by the celebrations going on around us, and even by the joy and promise that are part of the Christmas story. That story that we have heard again tonight is very familiar to most of us: a story whose meaning has been explored by writers, artists and musicians over the centuries. It takes us to the very heart of our faith - the faith which has been handed on to us over two thousand years. The message of the story is one of a hope and a promise that are ours through the birth of Jesus, and it is precisely because of this that the evil and suffering that scar the lives of individuals and scar our world seem to come into sharper focus at this time of year.

The Pope in his peace message has vividly depicted the continuing plight of the people of Africa and we can be sure that Christian leaders will turn our thoughts and prayers to the Middle East, and to Iraq, in their messages tomorrow. And there is a *special* poignancy when some of the places for which we will pray are so near to the little town of Bethlehem, of which we sang at the beginning of Mass.

What I'd like to suggest tonight is that, as we pray for those who are living with violence, with pain and with conflict, *we* need to hear *them* and learn from them: to allow them to lead us into the depths of the Christmas message: to *hear* the wisdom that can only issue from those who have lived so deeply in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Sometimes I've heard it said by commentators in the West that victims of war, of hunger and homelessness have been let down by "their" God, and I always find that very arrogant and condescending. It's not for those who live in prosperity to pass judgement on the God of the poor and the oppressed, or to question the living faith that sustains them. There are Christians celebrating this feast in the Holy Land and in Iraq who have known very vividly the darkness that is illumined by this night. They speak with power and

authority to us who share the same faith: and their witness to faith is deep and costly. That should give us pause and give the lie to any cynicism or complacency in our own celebration of Christmas. Not only that, but their witness should be a source of deep strength to those of you here, or at home, who have yourselves experienced pain or trouble over the last year. If the victims of violence and war can hear and be strengthened by the message of the angels to the shepherds, then so can we. "Do not be afraid. I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people."

The reason why this message can still speak to us today, wherever we are hearing it, is that the reality it proclaims is *our* reality. The Child born for us is the Saviour who died for us, and took to himself all sickness, sin and death. He is our living Lord, the focus of our faith, hope and love in this act of worship. Tonight in this Mass we celebrate his dying and rising to new life. The mother of Jesus, who is central to the Christmas story, later stood at the foot of the Cross and we stand with her in contemplating the mystery of Christ's death, a death that will always speak to the trouble and conflict in our lives. Indeed, the wisdom of the Cross speaks more deeply to human suffering than any words of comfort. It also speaks to our nervous and anxious questions in ways that can never be put into words. So let us permit that message to speak to us all afresh tonight. In the stable of Bethlehem we see something of the poverty and sheer ordinariness in and through which the glory of God is revealed to the world. We, too, can find glimpses of that glory in the everyday things of life: in routine, in work, in family life, in our loneliness, in our togetherness, in our well-being or our pain. If we look at the circumstances of our life with the eyes of faith, and if we keep our eyes open, then the Lord will show himself to us, because he is risen and his Word speaks to us today. It is a living word so let us find life in its message. And so I say to all of you tonight, whoever you are, wherever you are: a light shines in the darkness, a Child has been born for us, a Son has been given to us. He is Christ the Lord.