

## **Homily for Christmas Morning Mass 2009**

By Fr Steele Hartmann OCSO

In comparison with Midnight Mass, today's Gospel is rather sober: no shepherds in the fields tending their flocks, no choirs of angels singing "Glory to God in the highest", no babe lying in a manger. What we get is: "The Word was made flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). Now that the celebrating and rejoicing are over, perhaps it is timely to look a little more soberly at what it is that we are celebrating.

Today's Gospel says to us: "To all who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12). This is a reminder to us that elsewhere Jesus says to us, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Genesis tells us that we are made to be in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). The image of God that is held up to us today is that of a little child. Let us look, then, at this little child to see what it might say to us about being in the image of God, about being God's child.

The prophet Isaiah, speaking of the promised Messiah, says, "For there is a child born for us, a son given to us, and dominion is laid on his shoulders; and this is the name they give him: Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace. Wide is his dominion in a peace that has no end" (Isaiah 9:5-6). It is this 'peace' that I want to look at, for this seems to be the aspect that is stressed at Christmas, the gift that is held out to us. Indeed, the angelic choir sang out on high: "Glory to God in highest heaven and peace to all who enjoy his favour" (Luke 2:14).

We who live in this country are truly blessed. For, apart from those few who lived in Darwin in World War II, we have not known what it means to be not at peace. So we find it hard to appreciate what it means to long for peace. In speaking of that time when the Lord will deliver his people from all that besets them, Isaiah said in prophecy, "No more will the sound of weeping or the sound of cries be heard in [Jerusalem], in her no more will be found the infant living only a few days, or the old man not living to the end of his days. To die at the age of a hundred will be dying young; not to live to be a hundred will be the sign of a curse. They will build houses and inhabit them, plant vineyards and eat their

fruit. They will not build for others to live in, or plant so that others can eat" (Isaiah 65:19-22). This is what his people, a people not at peace, wish for and long for: no more violence that cuts life short, making a home you can live in till the end of your days, enjoying the fruits of your labour — simple things, really. Obviously, though, these things they do not enjoy now. For who would long for what they already have, as St Paul might ask (Romans 8:24).

To understand and see what it would be like to live in such a place we need only look at the Middle East, the land where Isaiah spoke, the land of Jesus' birth, a land still yet not at peace: indiscriminate acts of violence followed by equally indiscriminate acts of reprisal in which the young, the old, any one at all — men, women, children, are killed or maimed with the rest left only to weep and wail; people being evicted from their homes who are simply told, "This is not your home anymore"; people having their homes bulldozed down by those more powerful; people being walled off from their land and livelihoods. We here in our lucky country do get a small taste of what it must be like to live in a land of no peace in the growing numbers of seemingly random and seemingly senseless acts of violence and road rage, and which seem to be growing in their level of violence. In these we get a feel for what it is like to live among a people not of good will, and know, then, a little of what it's like to live in fear.

All this seems a long way from Christmas and the Christ child. But of this child and his kingdom of peace, the prophet Isaiah said, "The wolf lives with the lamb, the panther lies down with the kid, calf and lion cub feed together, with a little boy to lead them. The cow and the bear make friends, their young lie down together. The lion eats straw like an ox. The infant plays over the cobra's hole, into the viper's lair the young child puts his hand" (Isaiah 11:6-8). Here we can begin to appreciate something of what we are being asked at Christmas. To understand what I mean, let me read you a quote from a John Brewer of Northern Ireland, a land where for decades there has been no peace, but a land where for decades the desire for it has been keenly felt: "In the context of over thirty years of troubles," he says, "violence, fear and division are known. Peace is the mystery! People are frightened of peace. It is simultaneously exciting and fearful. This is mystery. Peace asks a lot of you. Peace asks you to share memory. It asks you to share space, territory, specific concrete places. It asks you to share a future. And all of this you are asked to do with and in the presence of your enemy.

Peace is a mystery. It is walking into the unknown" (*The Newcastle Herald*, 31/5/2004).

The call at Christmas is to walk on into this unknown, to be the peacemaker — to be the little child who plays over the cobra's hold and stretches out his hand to the viper in his lair, to be the calf that lies down with the lion. This is a very big ask, for it is a very risky business, as Isaiah's imagery graphically illustrates. Ours is to be the child, for ours is childishly to take the risk. For this Jesus, who comes to us at Christmas, says to us, "You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45). This Jesus, who asks us to be a child of God as he is, asks of us nothing he himself has not done. He came to forge peace, extend forgiveness, and so he would sit down to eat with sinners (Mark 2:16), one of whom ultimately betrayed him (Mark 14:20). He knows the risk. This Jesus calls us to be his disciples, to be with him where he is (John 12:26), to do as he did. For if no one is willing to take the risk, there can be no peace, and the Realm of the Prince of Peace will be as far away as ever. This Jesus, who comes to us as a little child, says to us, "Happy are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Here is the Way! This Jesus, who calls us to follow his example (John 13:15), has given us the wherewithal to do it.

As Risen Lord he came to his disciples after his betrayal and said to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sin you forgive, they are forgiven" (John 20:21-23). Or as our Gospel put it this morning: "To all who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God." This Jesus warns us it will not be easy, but promises us it will be worth it: "Happy are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how the persecuted the prophets before you (Matthew 5:11-12). Here is our call. This Christmas morn, the little child of Bethlehem says to us, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." May the Christ Child come to you, and breathe his Spirit on you, that you may find the courage to walk on into his Kingdom of Peace.