

A Christmas Letter

While they were there,
the time came for her to have her child,
and she gave birth to her firstborn son.
She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid
him in a manger, because there was no room for
them in the inn.



May His gift of peace and love be
birthed anew in your life this
Christmas.

Dear Friends,

2011 has been a year that has caused us to reflect very deeply on the fragility of life but also on the wonders that surround us because of the advances that have been made in medical science and the continued dedication of those involved in our Health Care Service.

It is true to say that Pdraig's diagnosis and subsequent surgery has dominated both of our lives in negative and positive ways. We missed very much our annual visit to the US in order to visit with family and friends but we have also been blessed to have family members from Ireland and the US come to stay and support us.

It was frightening to have to cope with major radical surgery but it has also made us much more aware of the need to trust in God, to trust in each other and to trust the expertise of our medical team; especially in those dark hours when things didn't seem to be going so well. We were also very aware that we were surrounded and held by prayer and good wishes of lots of people on several continents. In short, we are very aware that we have much to thank God for.

The notion of journey is very much at the heart of the Mystery of the Incarnation: the God who journeys to be with us as one of us; and the various journeys that were an integral part of this process so that the Child could be born in Bethlehem. Some journeys are a delight such as going to visit those who are special to us; other journeys are forced upon us such as illness which often fill us with fear and doubt. But even these emotions are echoed in the Nativity story too.

Our journey to Christmas this year has been very low key in many ways as the demands of work and hospital appointments kept us very focused on daily living. The feeling of fragility seems ever present in our own particular circumstances but it is also the reality of many people in these difficult economic times. We are sure that this is reflected in your own family lives too both in terms of health and economic stresses. And yet the challenge is to continue to trust: to trust in the God who comes to meet us; to trust in our own inner strengths; and to trust in the goodness that surrounds us in the lives and gifts of others.

In our church family, at this time, we are also very conscious of the fragility of life as many of our members are coping with illness at this time. Pain and suffering are all too often seen in our world today as failures; cruel realities afflicted upon people. Too often, those who are ill see themselves as a burden to others, with little or no purpose left in life. And yet our Christian faith and the mystery that we celebrate in the Incarnation tells us something different.

The God who comes to us in the Child of Bethlehem is the One who walked the Way of the Cross so that we might have life in all its abundance. As Christians, we know that there is another aspect to the pain and suffering that we experience:

"I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." [Col 1:24]

Here Paul is teaching us that we can unite the pain and suffering we experience to that which Jesus suffered on the Cross. That within the great mystery of Redemption there is meaning and purpose to our pain and suffering. Paul saw the purpose of his suffering as a means to an end: the glorification of God in and through Jesus who suffered and died so that we might attain the glory of the children of God [Rmn 8:21].

When pain is very intense and the suffering prolonged, when we are unable to do the things we used to do, when we are no longer able to go out and enjoy being with others it is very difficult to see how God can be glorified in what we are going through. I'm sure that these same thoughts must have been going through the minds of Mary and Joseph as they struggled on to find some where to stay in Bethlehem. And yet it is in the midst of all that mayhem that God leaps into our humanity in the person of the Child that was born. The Christmas story continues to remind all of us that whatever our situation, our lives are precious to the One who comes to be with us; and that in all situations, we can find purpose and the means to glorify God.

With lots of love and prayers for you and your family in this very blessed and holy season of Christmas.

Padraig & Ruth