

## **Christ is born!**

The events of our Lord's life – and of the lives of many of his saints – were anything but “joyful and triumphant” at the time. Even so great and victorious festival as the Lord's Ascension (“See the conqueror mounts in triumph”) seemed to leave His disciples with feelings of loss and bewilderment. These were not good times at the time.

We too are not living in good times. The times are deeply ungodly, and the Christian faith is under attack, often from those who (supposedly) are within the Church.

Also, over this last year – it hardly needs to be said – we have been struck with adversity in the present pandemic; and, I would say, in over-reactions to it not least by authorities both secular and religious. Yet some people have genuinely gained even from this (not in an exploitative way) such as a great many homeless people who have been given a fresh start when taken off the streets. What appears all-bad may bring some good. Conversely, what appears good may bring many unforeseen evils. *[This is not, and must not be read to imply, a comment on the Brexit trade agreement.]*

So it was on that first Christmass. The Holy Family suffered, although the Lord himself was protected by Mary and Joseph, and ultimately by His eternal Father.

Despite the extreme contrasts between the two narrative accounts of our Lord's birth in Scripture, there is one thing that is common to both – the long hard journey. Both gospel writers agree that the birth involved a difficult transition. Saint Luke places it before the birth (a journey from the North down to Bethlehem). Saint Matthew places it after the birth (possibly some time afterwards) in the form of the flight from Bethlehem to Egypt.

Of the two accounts, Saint Matthew's proves much more dramatic with the slaughter of the Innocents. This is our only source for this unspeakable incident, but, to my mind, it seems impossible that Saint Matthew made it up. The action is typical enough of Herod the Great, and Saint Matthew finds it difficult to make his Old Testament texts fit as simple prophecies of the event.

Certainly no-one can say that this massacre was “joyful and triumphant”. The Lord Himself was spared (by angelic warning and the swift action of Joseph) but the event itself was an almost unimaginable cruelty (except that we have become used to such cruelties now).

So it is that in the midst of pain, loss and failure we are called to rejoice. And not just called, but commanded. And we can rejoice precisely because giving glory to God in no way depends upon our emotional well-being, or upon being “in the mood”. The less inclined we are to praise God, the greater the praise when rendered. The fundamental mistake is to confuse being (or praising) “in the Spirit” with being in the mood. Nothing could be further from the truth. We celebrate – we must celebrate – things that are intrinsically good, not because we want to feel good. God's Holy Spirit (God Himself) does not grant us easy, lovely feelings, but takes us beyond our feelings, beyond ourselves. But that, of course, is to begin another sermon.

For today we remain resolute. We thank God for His coming in human nature, and we now press forward to the truths of His ministry among sinful men, His confrontation of the devil, His sufferings, death and, indeed, only thus to his “joyful and triumphant” resurrection. So, yes, I must and can genuinely say “Happy Christmass”!