

Reflection for this Sunday

Colleges and Universities have closed for the Christmas break as many students head home to try and be with family over the festive period. Schools throughout the country will stop for the Christmas holidays over the next few days but sadly, this year, there is not the same buzz and excitement that we would have associated with these last days of the school terms or a break from college or university. This year, we need to apply the pause button and hope that at some stage in the future we will be able to reset it. Monday is also 32nd anniversary of the Lockerbie air disaster which many of us can still remember. For a younger generation, it forms part of the history books. Each year, 4th Sunday of Advent focuses on Our Lady and this year we reflect on the Annunciation. The dramatic encounter of faith between the angel Gabriel and Mary makes us reflect on our own encounter with God through prayer and how we might gaze in wonder and awe at the events of Bethlehem soon to take place. The pathway to the stable is a challenge for us. There is so much that we would have just taken for granted in the past that will simply not happen this year. There is a strange emptiness in many peoples' lives as we reach the last days of Advent. The landscape and the tapestry of Advent, however, does not change. What we will celebrate at Christmas will not change but how we might celebrate it as a community of faith and within our own families will be different. The angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary of "Do not be afraid" could be equally addressed to us as we find ourselves walking into new and unprecedented situations. Advent and, in time, Christmas have been like that for many people. We hope to find a pathway to God this Christmas that might help us celebrate the Christ-child event of Bethlehem. It might be a different path this year, but it is important that we hear those same words addressed to Mary and let them take root in our lives of faith. We might feel that God is absent when we are really looking for and trying to discover a God who is present to us. That God will be the child in the manger whom Mary brought into the world through her courageous acceptance of the angel's message. The following words by Pope Benedict XVI addressed to young people at World Youth Day at Cologne in 2005 may help us stay focused on the event of Bethlehem:



Annunciation embroidery, St Mary's church, Walesby. Embroidered by Dilys Jones and given to the church in 2013.

“The Magi heard the answer: “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophets” (Mt.2:5) and, enlightened by these words, they chose to press forward to the very end. From Jerusalem they went on to Bethlehem. In other words, they went from the word which showed them where to find the King of the Jews whom they were seeking, all the way to the end, to an encounter with the King who was at the same time the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Those words are also spoken for us. We too have a choice to make. If we think about it, this is precisely our experience when we share in the Eucharist. For in every Mass the encounter with the Word of God introduces us to our participation in the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ and, hence, introduces us to the Eucharistic Meal, to union with Christ. Present on the altar is the One whom the Magi saw lying in the manger: Christ, the living Bread who came down from heaven to give life to the world, the true Lamb who gives his own life for the salvation of mankind. Enlightened by the Word, it is in Bethlehem – the “House of Bread” – that we can always encounter the inconceivable greatness of a God who humbled himself even to appearing in a manger, to giving himself as food on the altar. We can imagine the awe which the Magi experienced before the Child in swaddling clothes. Only faith enabled them to recognise in the face of that Child the King whom they were seeking, the God to whom the star had guided them. In him, crossing the abyss between the finite and the infinite, the visible and the invisible, the Eternal entered time, the Mystery became known by entrusting himself to us in the frail body of a small child.”

Pope Benedict XVI, “God’s Revolution: World Youth Day Talks,” page 38