

There is something significant about gathering at night as we begin the celebration of Christmas. Of course, it captures the Gospel story of the birth of Jesus, but there is more to it than that. Night-time evokes images of things hidden and not fully seen, and in this sense, it also suggests waiting for the day to come to light. For many, especially children, night also conveys a feeling of fear. On the other hand, night-time is usually very quiet, and things are still. It can be a meditative time. As we begin this celebration of Christmas, it is good to be aware of these things about the night, because they may help us better hear the Christmas story.

As I was pondering the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, I was reminded of some words that we say during the Eucharistic Prayer, when we pray to God to send the Holy Spirit like the dewfall. The dewfall can be something that we don't notice; it is not like flooding rain or heavy snow. It is gentle, and it soaks into the ground, transforming and giving life, not destroying. In the Eucharistic Prayer the dewfall is an image of the Holy Spirit which will make Christ present.

I thought of this image because the birth of Jesus was something that went unnoticed by most of the people at that time. He was born without fuss or fanfare, yet his birth ultimately had a greater impact than all those who seek after power. The contrast with the leaders of his time speaks volumes. Those who arrive with loud noise and fanfare usually unsettle things for a short while, then they disappear. They may cause chaos which someone else will have to repair. They may rule by force, without doing much good. The birth of Jesus is different to this. His birth was unheralded, yet in the short span of his lifetime, he would transform lives. He comes as a baby who is vulnerable, even more so because of the conditions into which he was born.

We are told that he was placed in a manger – an eating trough used by the animals. It is easy to pass over this detail, but it is a powerful symbol of how God acts. Not only has God come to us with all the limitations of human flesh, but he has come in humility and poverty. This is a powerful symbol because it reminds us of where we have to go to meet Jesus. We encounter him where he chose to be encountered, namely among all that goes to make up our human lives. In his birth, he identifies with the weakness and limitations of human life. He is there where we struggle or feel anxiety. He is there where we are anxious or concerned. He is equally there when we rejoice and are glad, or when we experience achievement or success. The lesson

from his birth at Bethlehem is that he identifies with our lives; he knows our lives; and like the dewfall, he quietly and gently seeps into our lives to sustain us.

The Christmas story is also a story of the angels appearing to the shepherds telling them that this is news to be shared, and that in doing this they would be praising God. In our time, while there is a lot of talk about Christmas, not everyone notices the birth of Jesus. In that, things are probably not much different to that time long ago in Bethlehem. Yet, Jesus is still among us and still gently, quietly transforming lives. He is still like the dewfall, arriving without fuss, so as to sustain lives.

In the times we live in, there are many people who live their lives in fear – and they might even describe their life as living in darkness. There are people who are searching for meaning in life and are not sure where to find it. There are people who do not know God but are curious when they meet those whose lives are lived in communion with God. It is into that night, that darkness, that Jesus comes tonight. And we are his heralds, just as the angels were. We might not know these people who are searching or curious or fearful, but they might look at us and take note. We can be like the dewfall that is the Holy Spirit, making Jesus present in their world. This will not likely happen by our yelling from the rooftops, but by lives lived in love of God and one another – not extraordinary lives, but lives that have met the Saviour whose mother laid him in a manger, an eating trough used by animals.

On this Christmas night, we give glory to God, who has worked wonders and visited his people.