

Bishop Martin's Christmas message for the diocese

One of the great moments of Christmas, for me, is to kneel in front of the Christmas crib at midnight, and to join with others in singing, 'Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning...'

This year, I can't help recalling that it was St Francis of Assisi who introduced the idea of making a replica of the scene of the birth of Jesus, as a way of communicating the reality and the beauty of this mystery.

Just as it is possible to sentimentalise the birth of Jesus, so it is also possible to reduce St Francis to a youthful, sentimental troubadour for Jesus who preached to the birds and wore sandals as a sign of poverty.

2024 is the year in which the Franciscan Order has been celebrating the 800th anniversary of St Francis receiving the *stigmata*, the physical evidence in his body of the crucifixion wounds of Jesus in hands, feet and side.

This happened at night, when Francis was consumed by profound, mystical, contemplative prayer. The experience of something exceptional was witnessed by a brother friar who was with him. But the marks of the passion, the *stigmata*, were not discovered until Francis died, two years later, in 1226.

It will be obvious to all of us this Christmas that the Church of England is also wounded. We should not sentimentalise this. These wounds signify that the Church has not been, and can never be, inoculated against the effects of evil perpetrated from outside its life but also from within, by some of its own members.

Francis has something to teach us here. It is that if in baptism you embark upon a life of discipleship of Jesus Christ, there will be times when it is astonishing in its beauty. There will also be times when that beauty is compromised, not eradicated, by the terrible damage that greed and power can inflict on vulnerable, innocent people.

But there will never be a time when Jesus does not love you and call you to a life lived on earth more fully, freely, and joyfully. He promises us that this life is but a foretaste of the glory for which our Heavenly Father made us. It is the work of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who powerfully befriends us with the expansive grace that comes from God the sublime and glorious Trinity.

When we greet the Christ child, we should be confident that we are seeing God's gift of life to every human being and the inviolable dignity that gift betokens.

This is the foundation of Christian social teaching and its legitimate political action. It must also be the inspiration of our silent prayer, our devotional routines, our public worship and evangelisation, and the lens through which we read and rejoice in the Holy Scriptures.

Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing. O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

+Martin