

*St Mary's Catholic Church, Barnard Castle,
St Osmund's Catholic Church, Gainford &
The Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham*

A Message for Christmas 2020 from Father Grieves

1st December 2020

Dear friends and parishioners,

I've just received a very early Christmas card from a friend overseas. He obviously believes in posting early! The card is a picture of the crib with a star in the shape of a cross shining in the sky above. Many of the paintings of the birth of Jesus include this cross-like star and hint at the cross in the halo around the head of the infant Christ. Here, at the moment of the nativity, there is already a suggestion of Christ's passion and death, and a fitting reminder to us all of the suffering and death our world has tragically known through the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020.

The same hints of future suffering are to be found in the bible stories of the birth of Jesus. St. Matthew makes it clear that this is no ordinary birth. He quotes a passage from the prophet Isaiah about Rachel suffering with her children. The gifts, which the wise men bring, have a symbolic meaning related to death. Joseph's dream is about the threat that Herod is going to slay the infant king. St. Luke tells of Simeon and Anna in the Temple and the prophecy to Mary of the sword that will pierce her soul. It seems from the very beginning that the Christ child is born to die.

There is also a strangeness in the Christian Calendar about the days immediately following Christmas Day. At a time when we are celebrating the birth of Jesus, we turn at once to remember the deaths of St. Stephen, the Holy Innocents, St. John the Evangelist and St. Thomas a Becket.

Being involved with Jesus Christ and his Holy Catholic Church brings new life, joy, hope, goodwill, purpose and peace – these are some of the things we shall be celebrating in our Christmas Masses – but involvement with Christ and his Church also brings the risk of pain, suffering and even martyrdom.

Very few men and women have been converted to the Christian faith and life by the babyhood of Jesus. But millions upon millions have been converted by Jesus the man, the grown man, the full-grown man, the man in whom faith sees

the fullness of God. Particularly have people been changed and transformed by the living Christ, risen from the dead. They have not met Jesus so much in his babyhood, as in his manhood, and even more in his passion and in his risen power.

Christ does not offer himself to us trivialised and sentimentalised in the Christmas crib, the school nativity plays of tea-towels and tinsel, or in the dream world of so many popular Christmas cards or Christmas songs. Jesus comes into our world to challenge us and to judge us. The Christmas celebrations of the Holy Innocents and St. Stephen recall us sternly from the world of materialism, paganism, and fairy-tale, which obscures for many the true meaning of Christmas; back to the real world of joy and sorrow, hope and despair, death and new life, known by all in our world today because of the Covid 19 pandemic.

May God bless you and keep you safe this Christmastide and always.

Father Grieves

