

## **Christmas Message from Bishop Denis for 2021:**

Christmas introduces us to strange places like Bethlehem. And into peculiar buildings like stables, sheds, outhouses. The prophet Micah pinpoints with precise accuracy “*and you Bethlehem Ephrathah, the least of the clans of Judah, out of you will be born for me the one who is to rule over Israel*”. Scripture scholars remind us that Ephrathah is also called Bethlehem. Bethlehem means ‘*house of bread*’. Pope Emeritus Benedict in his beautiful work ‘*The Infancy Narratives*’ reminds us that from the moment of his birth, Jesus belongs outside the realm of what is important and powerful in worldly terms. It is this unimportant and powerless child that proves to be the truly powerful one, the one on whom ultimately everything depends.

We forget that too easily. The very birth of Christ helps to realign our values, our priorities, our concerns. Maybe the Covid pandemic has also helped us somewhat to readjust our lives, living in a huge time of uncertainty. The pandemic has robbed us of loved ones whom we have lost in death; it has robbed us of the usual gatherings and encounters that are so life-giving and it has robbed us of normality, of having some sense of control on what’s happening around us. We are living indeed in times of profound change and uncertainty. And this change and uncertainty were also part of the world that Christ was born into 2,000 years ago.

Today it’s into this uncertainty that God comes to us and is born in our stables, sheds and outhouses. But we must make room for him and not lose sight of what Christmas is really about. The pandemic has made us experts at using apps like Facetime, let’s take time to look on the face of Christ. In that face we see a reflection of ourselves, our world, our insecurities, our uncertainties. Christmas is not about sending cards, receiving presents, visiting friends and yes we will nonetheless do all three; essentially Christmas is about looking on the face of Christ, and allowing that face to profoundly change us. Let us go to be nourished in the ‘house of bread’, in Bethlehem.

I conclude with the translated version of Mairtín O’Direáin’s poem ‘Cuireadh do Mhuire’:

“Do you know Mary  
Where you’ll go this year

To look for shelter  
For your Holy Child  
While every door  
Is shut in His face  
By the hatred and pride  
Of the human race?

Deign to accept our invitation  
To this island by the sea  
In the ancient West.  
Bright candles will be  
Lit in our church windows  
And turf fires kindled  
On the snowy heath”.

I pray that each of you will be blessed and enriched as you look on the face Jesus at Bethlehem and that 2022 will bring you abundant blessings.