

## **SERMON FOR CHRISTMAS MORNING at 8am | 25.12.2017**

**I can hardly believe that it is eight years since my mother died. She was a great age, 90, and by chance we had been able to bring her back to North London where she was born.**

**In the months that followed, we spent quite a bit of time thinking about a gravestone for her and I recalled one of the few material comments she ever made – about the wording on the grave of her uncle James: ‘He did kind things, kindly’. Needless to say, with the necessary gender adaptation, these were the words that we had inscribed on her stone too.**

**As so often, in the busyness of Christmas, it is the little things that stand out. For space reasons we had brought the altar (and therefore the Crib) down to the Blessed Sacrament chapel for the Children’s Crib Service and before it started, I noticed two small children kneeling in front of the Nativity scene, staring at the scene before them.**

**And what did they see? I suspect, to start with an almost incomprehensible poverty. Where are the home comforts - of beds, tables, showers and computer games? How would people manage without toilets and chests of drawers? Kids are always very practical.**

**But they are also perceptive and I suspect what Matilda and Barnaby were picking up were the other things represented there – one of which was kindness.**

**The word kindness has a very special ring to it. It is about more than just giving: it has the quality of giving to please, giving what will cost us, giving that will make a difference. Kindness springs from those with a real heart for other people, those – as the cliché reminds us – have the ability to walk in another person’s moccasins. It is about gift in the very best sense.**

**And the Nativity is all about that. It starts with the gift of life within Mary, the permission of an innkeeper to use a stable, the seeking out of the family by shepherds and wise men.**

**But more than that, the lack of the usual 21<sup>st</sup> century commodities which seemed so strange to those children, makes space for other qualities to reveal themselves.**

**For while we might think that our gifts of time, skill, status and money are the wherewithal that makes for a free society, in the face of real and dire poverty, these things cease to be important. Fergal Keane, currently BBC reporter in Africa made this point so well when he took a camera crew into a squalid hut somewhere in Somalia. The family were completely washed up; they had nothing. Yet, he said, their priorities ate into his soul: they looked to him not for money or even food but for the gifts of compassion and honesty, the willingness to confront their situation in ways that would make a difference. He was silenced by their total focus on the relationship that was being forged in that desperate place.**

**St Ignatius, as he was forming the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) made the same point in his Rule: *education is no good without kindness, discernment is no good without kindness and good judgement is no good unless it, too, is filled with kindness.***

**There is a directness about the Crib. It is not idyllic and it is not a show case for complicated theology. The scene in that stable cuts straight to the chase: it invites us to copy God's pattern of kindness, to reflect that gifts and giving all draw on the kindness that comes from God - and is authenticated by the suffering that we symbolize every time we make the sign of the Cross or put out our hands to receive his gifts of Holy Communion.**

**As in Fergal's meeting with the residents of that Somalian hut, everyone who stares at the Crib scene with any degree of sensitivity is going to be changed. Most of what I think is important has no place here: does it matter what I once learnt, what I own, what I have done or where I have been?**

**What the eyes of the Christ child are searching for is our ability to see the great wisdom and kindness of our creator God – and our willingness to welcome his values and his meaning, not just at Christmas of course but throughout our lives.**

**And the door to that particular stable is our ability to be kind.**