

*From the Public Affairs Office of the Archbishop of Westminster,  
Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor*

**P R E S S   R E L E A S E – (with extract from homily)**

25 December 2005

**CARDINAL ISSUES MIDNIGHT SOS FOR BETHLEHEM**

The Archbishop of Westminster has pleaded in his Christmas homily for the town of Bethlehem, saying he deplores the exodus of Christians from Bethlehem and the current condition of the town of Christ's birth.

He said Bethlehem was "corralled" and "blocked in" and its economy in shreds as result of Israeli security measures in response to terrorist violence.

Speaking at his Midnight Mass homily at Westminster Cathedral just hours before leaving for Sri Lanka, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor described the people of the town as "terribly alone", and urged Christians to visit.

He prayed that "the eyes and the hearts of the world be opened to what is happening there" and pleaded for a new strategy for peace.

He said the Holy Land conflict had inflicted "a terrible wound on humanity" and urged the parties to the conflict to "bind that wound" and "build bridges, not walls."

"Let Bethlehem be what it is meant to be: a free and open city," he urged.

Reflecting on the Incarnation, the Cardinal said allowing the Nativity to take root in people's lives "is about becoming more deeply who we are".

**Extract from homily:**

Darkness has summoned forth light. Tonight we proclaim, with joy, that God has burst into the world to share our humanity. In a poor cave, in a world under the shadow of violence, a Child is crying: it is a cry of longing, a cry of need. If we hear it, it will stop us in our tracks. We will drop everything and go running, as did the shepherds, towards the Child. The Child is crying for intimacy and love: it is the cry of all those who are lost and lonely. They are not asking for much: only to be part of the human family. It is the cry of human need: it is our own cry, deep in our hearts. The Child cries on behalf of the grieving, and the despairing; he cries for the exiled stranger and the elderly who will spend this Christmas alone. He cries on behalf of the four peacemakers being held hostage tonight in Iraq, and on behalf of their families who are spending this Christmas not knowing if those they love are alive or dead. Will we hear that cry tonight? Will we be deaf and distracted, or will we go running towards God, wriggling in the Manger, who is waiting for us to pick him up in our arms?

*TODAY IN THE TOWN of David a saviour has been born for you; he is Christ the Lord.* Many years ago I was fortunate to offer Mass in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, going down to the cave where Jesus was born to kiss that spot where God became one with man, binding himself to our humanity in an irrevocable covenant of love.

What has happened to that town since? How sad it is that Christians in Bethlehem feel compelled to leave the land of their birth for foreign lands, on account of the political situation in the Holy Land. How tragic that as a result of all the violence perpetrated there the little town of Christ's birth is corralled, blocked in by a wall and checkpoints. Borders have been re-drawn: families have been separated and ancient landmarks have been lost to the town. Commerce and tourism have been decimated; unemployment has led to an exodus of citizens, most of them Christians.

St. Jerome calls Bethlehem “the most sacred spot in the world for us, indeed for the whole world”. Yet Bethlehem, the icon of all pilgrim sites, sees only one in ten of the pilgrims who five years ago came to pay homage to the Christ Child. How tragic that Christians, who for centuries have lived in harmony with their neighbours and who have stood resolutely for peace, are being forced out by present circumstances.

The people of Bethlehem are tonight celebrating the Nativity with joy. But they feel terribly alone. Recently Pope Benedict accepted, on behalf of the Catholic Church, a symbolic Bethlehem passport. He wanted to show that we are all citizens of Bethlehem, and that Bethlehem should be a free and open city. I hope that we can play our part in ensuring that it stay that way: that those of you who have not visited Bethlehem and are able to will take time this year to do so: to stay there, and to show the people of that town that they are not alone. In the meantime, please pray for Bethlehem, that their town not become a museum, that they again have hope, that the eyes and the hearts of the world be opened to what is happening there.

The Christ Child is crying for the town of his birth.

With him, I want tonight to issue a plea. Violence is not the answer. Terror and repression are not the way of the Christ Child. To those with power, I want to say: seek peace with justice. The Holy Land conflict has inflicted a terrible wound on humanity. Bind that wound. Build bridges, not walls. Let Bethlehem be what it is meant to be: a free and open city. If you care about the human family, in God’s name, hear this plea. So much is at stake. As we sang tonight: *O Little Town of Bethlehem the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

IN THE GOSPEL tonight we hear that joyful news. “Do not be afraid”, says the Angel to the shepherds: “Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of Bethlehem a Saviour has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord.”

Deep in the darkness burns brightly an unquenchable light. Deep in the cave of Bethlehem the Christ Child cries out in longing. Let that light shine in your own lives; hear the cry on behalf of all humanity; pray that the wonderful knowledge of Jesus takes deeper root in your hearts; pray this Christmas with longing for our whole human family. Jesus is at its centre. Jesus is the Saviour of all humankind. Jesus is joy: a joy to be shared by the whole people. And how can we not share it? *“For there is a Child born for us, a Son given to us and dominion is laid on his shoulders. This is the name they give Him, Wonder Counsellor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.”* May God give to each one of you the blessings of this Christmas Night.

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