

Jesus, we know, is really present, whole and entire, in the Blessed

Sacrament.

But, He's just as present in another way; in Sacred Scripture - The Bible.

When we read the Scripture ourselves, but more powerfully when it's proclaimed to us in the Church, Jesus, through His Spirit speaks directly to our hearts.

So that we experience, and can say as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Wasn't our heart burning within us as he was talking to us? As he was opening up the scriptures to us?" Lk. 24: 32

As well as reading, and hearing the Scripture direct, we also need people full of the Holy Spirit to open its riches to us.

For me, there are three people in the Catholic Church who tower above all others in that respect.

Pope Benedict, Prof. Scott Hahn - an American layman, and Fr Nick King SJ of Campion Hall in Oxford.

During the last two years I've had the joy of hearing all three of them on separate occasions opening up the Scripture; and most recently Fr Nick at a Clergy Retreat for the Deacons of this Diocese.

He was talking about the Advent Season in the context of Luke's Gospel, which is the designated Gospel for this Church Year.

He said that Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is full of joy, and the Holy Spirit.

And, although Advent is thought of as a penitential season - hence the purple vestments - it's primarily a season of repentance.

The word penance, in the popular, and sadly the Catholic mind too, conjures up negative images.

Giving things up, or whatever it might be we undertake as a penance, in a lack-lustre, resentful sort of way, presents a joyless caricature of what following Christ Jesus is all about.

Not only to people inside and outside the Church, but also to ourselves; and that will produce within us a sadness of heart that infects the whole of our lives.

But if we don't really understand what being penitential is all about then, of course, we're going to go round with a gloomy look on our faces.

At its heart, doing penance is a way of saying sorry to the Lord for any ways in which we haven't followed Him as we should.

But, putting penance before repentance is like putting the cart before the horse.

Repentance is seeing things in a completely different way. Like being locked in a pitch-black room; then having the key turned, the door flung open, and the light turned on.

The way you thought the room was in your mind in the pitch-black, becomes completely different to its reality with the light streaming in.

It turns your perception of things round 180° and that's what repentance is all about.

The Holy Spirit convicts you of the fact that how you've been living up until now is completely out of balance with your being a Christian.

You've been in the dark with the light out, making do, getting by.

And when you've repented, then you want to say sorry to the Lord for not living out your Christian calling to be: "God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance, so that we might walk in them." Eph. 2: 10

That's the time when we're called to penance. To do something to show Him that we're sorry; just as we would anyone we truly loved, wouldn't we?

In the first reading, the Lord commands us to: "Take off your [clothes] of sorrow and distress, put on the beauty of the glory of God for ever, wrap the cloak of the integrity of God around you, put the diadem of the Eternal on your head." Bar. 5: 1 - 2

In other words, Christians aren't called to be sad, 'bah humbug,' Scrooge sort of people.

We're called to be joyful people because we know the Lord Jesus as our friend - the Faithful One. Or at least we should.....

I know, that for the commercial, secular world Christmas started about last July, which is when I received my first charity Christmas card catalogue! So it's very tempting for me to get very holier than thou, and start bemoaning the secularisation of Christmas.

To say that the world doesn't understand the 'real' Christmas spirit like we in the Church do.

But, I don't think we understand the 'real' Christmas spirit any more than M&S and Debenhams do.

Most of us - including me - who are Christians go around with sad and gloomy faces, complaining how stressful, secular, and commercial Christmas is.

We've lost the joy that knowing Jesus gives us because we've locked it away in that pitch-black room, which is our heart.

That joy Jesus talks of to the Samaritan woman at the well in John's Gospel where He tells her the gift He can give her will: "Will become in [you] a fountain of water which bubbles up to eternal life." Jn. 4: 14

As the writer of the Psalm we read this evening/morning says: "When the Lord delivered [us] from bondage, it seemed like a dream. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'" Ps. 125 (126): 1 - 2

But we mustn't confuse joy with a happy-clappy God delusion that is only for the terminally deluded who think there is a God, in spite of all the supposed evidence to the contrary, as contemporary atheists' think of Christians.

To be joyful is to know that there is sadness, pain, and suffering in the world; and that our lives are not untouched by all of that.

Just as Jesus was not untouched by it either as He: "Became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Jn. 1: 14

Dwelt among us to absorb all of the world's suffering and pain - and our personal suffering and pain - into Himself so as to emasculate it on the Cross.

This is the source of our joy, and the 'real' spirit of Christmas: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Jn. 1: 14

Next week is Gaudete - Rejoicing Sunday - but so is every Sunday in Advent in reality because Advent is preparing us for the 'Adventus,' the Arrival of Jesus.

His arrival 2000 years ago.

His arrival in our hearts, and lives when we invite Him in to rekindle the Sacrament of Baptism, which we received at the beginning of our Christian journey.

His arrival at the consummation of time, and history when we, and all of creation, will: "See [Jesus] coming on the clouds of heaven in power and great glory." Mt. 24: 30

I'm sure we've all got our Christmas list prepared for Santa, and for many people that's enough to satisfy them - or so they think.

But after they've opened their presents, had lunch, and then woken up, having fallen asleep in front of the 'Telly' listening to the Queen's Speech; then, in their heart of hearts, they know it doesn't satisfy.

May we be filled with joy because the Lord has done great things for us.

And, along with St Paul: "I give thanks to my God every time I think of you, all the time in each of my prayers on behalf of all of you, making my prayer with joy, that you may be pure and blameless, for Christ's Day, filled with the fruit of that righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the praise and glory of God." Phil. 1: 3, 10 & 11