

“A Child is born for us, and a Son is given to us.”

Is 9:6

Most of us have probably enjoyed preparing for Christmas, and quite right too. Buying and wrapping presents, putting up the decorations, gathering in the seasonal fare for the table, and listening to favourite pieces of music. All of these things add to our enjoyment of what should be, and indeed is, the most wonderful time of the year.

The shops have been preparing for Yuletide for months now, and many of us have joined in by putting up Christmas trees, in some cases, even before Advent was begun. Office parties and school plays, coloured lights and tinsel, mince pies and sausage rolls have all fed into the holiday mood. Over the weekend everyone heaved themselves up for the last great push to make sure everything was ready in time. And at last, the big day is here and we can all celebrate with family, friends, and loved ones.

But I wonder how many trees will be dismantled on Boxing Day, or as soon as the weekend is over at any rate. I wonder how long homes will remain decorated or how much longer seasonal music will be heard in the background. In just a couple of days, the sight and sound of decorations and music in our shops will feel stale and tired.

Yet even those of us who see through this superficial shimmer cannot remain unaffected by the build-up that lasts weeks, and the anti-climax that comes crashing down within hours.

But why is this so? Why *do* we invest so heavily in the build-up? Why is it that the expectation and the anticipation is all, and the feast day itself counts for so little?

At one level, the answer is simple: once the presents are opened, what is there left to look forward to?

We look around us at a world torn by war and destruction, and at societies riven with strange and perverse ideologies, and we wonder why. Why do we twist the good and despoil the beautiful? ...because we are all damaged by original sin. In the Garden of Eden, Adam thought he knew better than his Creator, thought he knew better how things should be ordered, and started to re-order what God had given him to suit his own tastes and fancies.

Ever since that distant day we, Adam's descendants, have continued to do the same. On the global stage or in our domestic politics, in society generally or in the privacy of our own homes, in our families and in our hearts, we always know better than God, don't we? We always want to order things according to our liking rather than to God's. 'Not my *Creator* but *I* shall be the judge of what constitutes right and wrong, good and bad. I shall live not according to what Almighty God has revealed, and what He has made known to us through His Church which He established for that very purpose, but according to my *own* lights. And these lights of mine will shine their spotlight on my rights and my entitlements, and woe betide anyone who tries to interfere with them or tries to tell me otherwise.

Our preparations for Yuletide follow exactly this line. The early start, the heavy investment in the anticipation rather than in the feast day itself, all point towards a celebration of what *I* am looking forward to, and what will make *me* happy on the day. My preparations are ordered towards self, and geared to what *I* will get out of it.

And that is why, at St Pancras, our Christmas crib will remain in place long after the trees and lights have been removed, right up to the end of the Christmas season proper, right up to the feast of Candlemas on 2nd February. For forty days we will be able to kneel down in front of the shrine of the new-born Christ-child, and pray before the Saviour of the world, who has given Himself to us as the perfect gift. Stripping Himself of all the appurtenances of divine glory which are His by right, and emptying Himself of the splendour and majesty of His kingship, He humbled Himself to become as we are in all things but sin,

without ceasing to be what He has been from all eternity. And whilst all things were in quiet silence, when the night was in the midst of her course (Wis 18:14-15), He leapt down into a world so caught up in itself, so obsessed with its own affairs, that it barely noticed His arrival.

But we *shall* remember who He is, not just today and tomorrow, but the next day and the following day also, and right up to the feast of Candlemas. We shall go on bended knee before the One who came to save us from our self-obsessions. We dare to look ahead to the wood of the manger being transformed into the wood of the Cross, to holly leaves become a crown of thorns and to berries become drops of blood.

Don't leave this church without kneeling before the crib each and every time you visit, from now until the end of the Christmas season proper at the beginning of February. For in this way you really will have celebrated today's feast in its proper spirit, and you really will be able to pass on to others the graces received today.