

A sermon given by the Dean at Mattins.

CHRISTMAS DAY 2009 - MORNING PRAYER

‘The times are difficult. They call for courage and faith, (but) faith is a lonely virtue...especially where an authentic community of love is not an accomplished fact, but a job to be begun over and over, as in all Christian communities. Love is not something we get from Mother Church as a child gets milk from the breast; it also has to be given. Christmas is not then just a sweet regression to breastfeeding and infancy. It is a serious and sometimes difficult feast.’

Those words are from the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton. Those who know his writings will recognise the style and tough theology with which he challenges his readers.

Merton reminds us of the nagging demand which lies just beneath the surface of our Christmas nostalgia and beneath the outward show of tinsel-town. His words are an invitation (to put it no more strongly) to take serious note of what God is saying to us in the actions of the Christmas Story: actions which, as we are so fond of saying, tend to speak louder than words.

What God is saying is this: Whatever threats that may assail our world or, I might add, our Church, whatever sorrows life’s circumstances may

cause for us, there are real grounds for hope, since our God sends his only Son in order to give us a fresh beginning and new life.

In the babe of Bethlehem we see love incarnate – love in action – love made perfect in human weakness – the love which God has for each and every one of his children in this small, but for some reason deeply privileged part of his creation.

His dearest wish is that we should know the extent of his love, for all eternity.

In that birth at Bethlehem we see God himself: vulnerable, humble and beautiful. That is also a good description of our Christian faith itself: vulnerable, humble and – at its best – beautiful. But that is not of course the whole story.

Thomas Merton reminds us that faith can be lonely, and love has to be given as well as taken – over and over. He is right in saying that Christmas is a serious and sometimes difficult feast. That has been made very clear to me and my colleagues in these past days in conversations with people, informally or in the context of spiritual direction, as particular burdens have been revealed, shared and explored.

Today, however, is for celebration. Today it is enough to know that 'love came down at Christmas'. But tomorrow, and the day after, and every day, it matters very much that we recognise there is a job to be done, and that we give love and give it again, over and over.
