

Christmas 2020

In my 48 years as a priest, two Christmases stand out: 2005 and 2020. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit my parish in Mississippi on August 29th. It destroyed people's homes, churches, flattened my presbytery. Parish church gutted. Yet, people were not willing to let devastation and destruction destroy their lives.

We held Christmas Mass in that gutted church. The hole in the roof was covered with blue tarp. Some of the stained glass windows were shattered. A large hole in the center of the floor was roped off with orange mesh. We salvaged a few pews and rusty metal chairs.

People showed up for Christmas Mass. They were brought together by a common faith and hope that, even at the darkest hour, there was hope; that hope that would allow them to rebuild their lives again.

Fast forward to this Christmas – 2020. We gather in a beautiful church to celebrate Christmas. The surroundings are still intact, not like Mississippi Christmas 2005. What is different is what we bring inside. Obviously, this Christmas is very different from any we ever experienced before; different because of what is happening inside us and around us.

We are scared. We are fearful. We have little control about our surroundings. We try to protect ourselves by doing what we are told. We talk about cocooning about living within a bubble but we are human beings and we are social beings. It is our nature to meet and greet; to sing and laugh, to make friends and be a friend; to travel and to open our doors in hospitality.

We can talk about what we miss; about empty chairs at Christmas dinners because someone couldn't come home or someone who left us too soon.

We can talk about fear factors, uncertainties, of not being in control of our lives.

We can talk about levels of restrictions, about numbers spewed out on the evening news. We can talk about lockdowns, about travel limits, Talking about all that can be depressing and debilitating.

Or we can talk about hope, the hope that will remind us that behind every cloud there is a silver lining; that behind every virus, there is a vaccine; that after every winter comes a new spring. After the shortest day, the days get longer.

Think about our own Irish history. We have been through wars and famines, potato blight and persecutions; Mass rocks and famine graves. Yet, through it all, as a people, there is one thing we didn't lose – our faith, our sense of hope that better days were ahead.

Isn't Christmas about hope; about a God who created us and came among us to live like us at the darkest time of the year; a God who came to a floundering people when they needed him most.

This Christmas, we can think about all the things we miss, things we cannot do, people we cannot see or we can think about the things that we have learned about ourselves, about our lives, about what we so often take for granted, about what is important.

Back on Christmas 2005 in Mississippi, we gathered to celebrate what we had instead of what we lost; to remember that people were more important than things; that the gift of friendship was better than any gift wrapped.

This Christmas, we gather to remember the same; about what we value, about what is really important, about it's the "who", not the "what" that matters.

That first Christmas, a child changed and transformed our world. That same child, born into our hearts, will change our lives and our world, irrespective of any virus, no matter how deadly it may seem. After all, because of our God and our faith in him, the virus will have a past, but we, because we are persons of hope, will have a future.