

Early in my ministry, I spent a couple of years in Madagascar, helping with the teaching in the Anglican theological college there. On Sundays, I was usually leading worship in the church where our rural college was based (we also had a site in the capital city, some 18 kms away); the congregation consisted of the students, nuns, and the people from the village. But one Sunday, I went to preside and preach at a remote bush village where one of my students was doing a pastoral placement. With a Land Rover full of 'troops' from the college, we took some supplies and gifts for him and his family. Thinking like a typical westerner for a moment, I had naively asked him what time the service begins. He responded as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, 'When you get there,' the right answer in a country where travel is difficult especially to remote places far from anything resembling a main road.

Well, we got there shortly after the normal start time of 9.00am, but no one was in a hurry. The people were there for the day, and lunch was being provided. After the service I met a woman who had set off at 6.00am and had walked for three hours to get to the service. I remembered her joyful radiant face as she received Holy Communion. It was the first time a Eucharist had been celebrated in the parish that year and this was now Palm Sunday. She told me of her arduous journey but how happy she was to be there. I noticed that she had very poor and worn-out shoes. I was moved by her resilient faith, in a part of the world where everyday life is difficult, but her faith was clearly grounded in love and need for God and practised without condition or compromise.

I have reflected often on how this woman's example ought to be quite normal for a Christian. But for many of us living mostly comfortable lives in the West, faith, prayer, and practical Christian living, can be so easily pushed to the margins of our life. Church worship is often made to fit in with other responsibilities or interests, rather than the other way round. And for some, the focus in church life can so easily lapse into things that are at most secondary. We can become over-fond or over-attached to our church structures, as I was genuinely shocked to discover in my first parish as an incumbent priest. There was an obsession about the church building, the prayer book, the hymns, and even, yes, the time of the service, and other things thought to enhance or even decide attendance at church. It is a

spiritual sickness if people let these symbols become the be all and end all of church life. They only serve to confine the living God to our restricted safety limits or comfort zones, making church attendance and worship to be on our own terms rather than God's. And while we play such silly little games, we fail to hear what God is trying to say to us, and perhaps especially saying to us today.

God is shocking us into understanding what is the true meaning of Christmas, and indeed of Christianity. The most dignified worship in the most beautiful cathedral with the most angelic choir must not be allowed to hide the stark spoken words of the Magnificat, the song of Mary, which formed the second part of our Gospel reading today.

The scene of Mary visiting Elizabeth, is by no means a sentimental story about the joys of two mothers to be. In telling this story, Luke is actually setting the scene for the gospel agenda, which he will repeat in his account of Pentecost. As we read of Mary going off in haste to share the good news that she is carrying Jesus, we see the mission of the Church, not just the institution or the leadership but the whole people of God with an important task to go and share the same news, driven by the Holy Spirit that they have received. Like Mary, Christians are called to be Christ-bearers, those who have given birth to Christ in their lives and have a message that is life changing, and will be, by the grace of God, received with joy by many.

Mary sets out something of the agenda that will be delivered by her Son in the words of her song, known as the Magnificat. These words express an important part of what the kingdom of God on earth will look like. It is rather uncomfortable for some, though it need not be if they had generous hearts and were aware of their own poverty, their need of God.

Luke presents Mary as a sort of archetype and primary image of the Church, showing how the Church and all Christian people are called to be. Humility is to be our hallmark, openness to God, a willing response to God's call and a shared commitment to bring Jesus Christ to the world. We who have received and accepted the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ as the vision for our lives, are called to make visible and present the signs of God's kingdom especially by doing

all we can to elevate those whom society has marginalised or are in any kind of need; we are called to banish pride and self-seeking from our dealings with others; we are called to model our lives on the values of God as shown supremely by Jesus.

We can only do this in small ways in our own lives and spaces, but it must be the central focus for what it means to be church, to be Christian, because otherwise, why are we celebrating Christmas? May the season and event that calls for human transformation, peace on earth and goodwill to all, be a time of renewal for us, a time for renewed prayer and commitment to working with God to bring about God's loving justice that overcomes fear and hate and all other humanly created barriers that exist among people.

More immediately, let us pray that all who are drawn to church by the Christmas story and the carols will find the light of Christ living and present and burning brightly among us, that they may be drawn more deeply into his life and love.