

Homily Christmas 2016 - Catholic Parish of Ivanhoe

Two months ago I was in Bethlehem and nothing could prepare me for what I saw. Not the Church of the Nativity or the star that marks the place in the cave where it is believed Jesus was born - I had knelt in that place several times before - but rather what I saw after I left what is one of the most famous churches in the world.

Over the road from the church in Manger Square there are the usual tourist shops selling all sorts of religious stuff - some beautiful - some typically tacky and tasteless. Then I saw this Christmas nativity scene, beautifully carved in olive wood, but ugly and confronting with its depiction of the reality of the lives of the local Palestinian people.



For this nativity scene contained not just Mary and Joseph, the infant Christ, the shepherds and wise men and the angel but it contained a solid wall - A wall so massive that it separated the wise men from the holy family. They could not climb it, could not get around it or through it. Their long journey to worship the Christ Child stopped dead before the separation wall - they could go no further. Their journey ended by a barrier that separates.

This is a daily reality for the Palestinian people today. A wall (that I hope you can see on the screen) built by the Israeli State to separate the Palestinian West Bank from Israel, a wall built to create an illegal border on stolen and occupied land, a wall built to harass and subjugate a people in their own land. A wall that divides and separates peoples: or as one piece of graffiti on the wall prophetically says *"one wall imprisons two peoples"*.

A wall that prevents Christian Palestinians living in Bethlehem travelling the ten kilometres to Jerusalem to go to Mass in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; a wall that runs through the property of convents and monasteries; family homes and farms - cutting them off from their olive groves, gardens, backyards, and source of income, food and employment; a wall that when closed as an act of collective punishment of the Palestinians left me in an iron cage with hundreds of locals not knowing when we would be processed or allowed to pass through.

Yet this is why God sent his Son to be born of Mary - born in Bethlehem - in a land we call holy but a land that knows no peace, no justice - only separation and walls. God sent Jesus to tear down the walls to remove the barriers that separate.



And most of those walls cannot be seen - they are not the walls that confronted me in Palestine they are invisible walls but they divide and separate just the same.

Walls created by mistrust, harsh words, gossip, fear, jealousy, sin, cowardice, intolerance, hatred, injustice, social class, indifference, misunderstanding, self-sufficiency and narcissism.

Sadly friends and families can create walls that divide and times like Christmas can make those walls seem even taller and wider.

Communities and nations create walls - the politics of fear and racism help us justify Manus Island and Nauru - detention camps that separate those whose only crime is seeking asylum and refuge from war and persecution.

And barriers between ourselves and God. Who needs God's laws and rules? I'm self-sufficient - I don't need to make some old fashioned commitment to God's call to conversion and repentance. My spirituality is where I do my own thing.



But Christ was born to tear these walls down. He is born again today to tear these walls down.

And who gives birth to Jesus today?

Mary – No! You do!

This Christmas it is not Mary who is asked to give birth to Jesus – it is you and me. Can we find room for Jesus in the crib that is you – the crib that is me?

[Pope Francis prays at the Separation Wall in Bethlehem]



You are called by God to bring Jesus to life.

In what you do.

In what you say.

In how you treat one another.

In how you commit yourself to the life of faith within the community of faith - A Christian people living, worshipping, caring and serving together.

With Jesus tear down the walls that separate - give him a home in your

life - and together - in place of walls - build friendships, families, communities of nation and Church that place trust, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, love, acceptance, tolerance, justice, peace and humble service of the 'other' before anything that divides.

Emmanuel - God with us - Jesus born in us today! This Christmas go from here and tear down a few walls.

*Fr. Bill Edebohls
25th December 2016*