

CHRISTMAS 2000

'CHRISTMAS IS A WONDERFUL TIME FOR CHILDREN' - this is a true saying and worthy of all men to be received.

It's been a special privilege for me to have enjoyed the company of so many children during the Christmas season both at the schools and in the church services. The lighting of the Christmas tree at St. Mary's and the carol services at All Saints' and at St. Peter's were absolutely wonderful.

I wonder what the children make of it all. Perhaps they think that all this 'hyp' is for the benefit of the parents - while the parents are claiming that they do it all for the children! Children of primary school age - so the experts say - are not able to think in abstract terms, so words like the opening of today's gospel reading are beyond them - 'The word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. Primary school children think in simple concrete terms. This is well illustrated by the child's drawing of the 'flight into Egypt' which had the figure of Pontius Pilate in the cockpit of a Boeing 747! Children of this age are not able to grasp metaphors or to understand parables. Sometimes I think that they must imagine that Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem on a reindeer sleigh. This confusion is not helped when it was decided recently in one of our cities not to allow any religious symbols to be used in street decorations for fear of offending people of other faiths.

The result of this is of course that children believe it all in a literal concrete way - Jesus - the wise men - the shepherds - Santa - and Rudolph. When a few years later they reach the cynical age and they turn their backs on childish things the world of sacred mystery is thrown out with the winter wonderland. This creates a feeling of despair about the Christian claims to truth and ultimately leads to rejection of the Church.

It is a difficult task which faces all Christians, to recover the true meaning of the Christmas stories so that they are credible in this age of doubt and cynicism. Where do we begin?

We naturally turn to the four Gospels for the original stories, only to find that St. Mark and St. John have no information about the birth of Jesus, St. Matthew has stories about the wise men and the flight into Egypt, St. Luke has a different set of stories about shepherds and angels. Experts have tried to merge together in one account the stories in Matthew and in Luke and have found it to be impossible. They don't fit. We must conclude therefore that at least some of them must be inaccurate or untrue. To dig deeper and to try to sort out which facts are historically accurate and which are mythical is quite a complicated process which is beyond the scope of most children - or is it?

Recently I watched part of a public lecture on television which was about fossils. The lecture was being delivered to a group of school children and the lecturer was explaining how it was possible by examining fossils of insects to tell all sorts of things about the environment in which the tiny insect lived many thousands, or in some cases millions of years ago. He also referred to the film 'Jurassic Park'. In the film a scientist had perfected the science of recovering the DNA material (the genetic code) of prehistoric animals from their fossil remains and recreating the animals themselves. The lecturer was keen to point out that this was not yet possible - but inferred that it soon would be.

It occurred to me that the process of analysing the gospel Christmas stories was the same in principle as the analysis of fossil remains. The stories are trapped in the pages of the New Testament in much the same way as fossils are trapped in the rocks, and by careful study we can tell a great deal about the environment in which the Christmas stories were formed. It then becomes possible to discover the gospel DNA and to reveal the secret of this to the world. The DNA of the gospel is of course Jesus, the genetic substance which contains the secret of life itself. This analogy can be pressed even further when we realise

that if it is possible to recreate a dinosaur by cultivating its DNA, so also it is possible to recreate Jesus in our world, and so we can, in a sense, cultivate the DNA of the gospels so the Christ may be born again in us. All this I know sounds rather fanciful and sensational. It is also so complicated that it can only really be understood by children. After all it is only the children who really understand 'Jurassic Park' and 'Star Trek' and things like that. We older folk are the fossils of our generation. Perhaps when scientists in a million years time study the fossils which we are forming today, they might discover some amazing truth about us. Who knows? Perhaps after all we will never really enter the kingdom of heaven until we learn to become as little children.

AMEN