

26 December 2010

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

I wish you, your families and friends a joyous and peaceful Christmas. As St Paul says may the message of Christ in all its richness find a home within you. I send particular greetings to those people who for one reason or another are away from their families; to those who are experiencing family difficulties and to all who have suffered the death of a family member during the past year, especially in the armed forces.

A few months ago I visited a ship in Portbury Docks and met with a group of Seafarers from the Philippines. They had been away from their families for many months. There was one man who had not seen his family for nearly two years. Any contact with the families was regarded as precious and the Seafarers were grateful for the help they received from the Apostleship of the Sea. The life of a Seafarer can be very lonely and sometimes dangerous. Contact with the Church is often a life line for them and is much appreciated. Seafarers recognise that wherever they travel, they still belong to the family of the Church. Please keep them in your prayers and be supportive of the Apostleship of the Sea.

The Gospel today tells the story of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. They went there for refuge, to find a safe home. Their journey was not out of choice but forced upon them, because Herod was seeking to kill the child Jesus. They fled in fear to a country and a people they did not know. They were strangers in a foreign land and must have experienced all the fears and insecurities that characterise the lives of refugees.

Today we are only too aware that there are still many refugees – families and individuals who are forced out of their own country because their lives are endangered. They hope to find a safe place in which to live without intimidation. They look for security and hope for a welcoming country in which their families can flourish and the dignity of each individual be upheld. Many of these are fellow Catholics but all of them are our brothers and sisters sharing a common humanity.

Out of a sense of human solidarity we are called to help one another and to speak out whenever and wherever people are abused by those in power.

Pope Benedict on his visit to the United Kingdom stressed the importance of family life for the good of society. Strong family bonds of love add to the general well being of people and provide a security especially in difficult times. The year ahead may not be easy for a number of families with pressure upon finances and the possibility of unemployment. We need one another. If the message of Christ finds a home within us, we will have a care for one another and a willingness to help all who feel vulnerable or afraid. Decisions which are made by Government or any one in authority must be person centred and taken for the sake of the common good. We need to remember that political, economic and business decisions have a moral bearing on the common good and affect the well being of individual lives.

As we continue this Christmas season may you grow in your awareness that Jesus is Emmanuel - a name which means 'God is with us'. May God be with you during this coming year.

With my best wishes and prayers

Bishop of Clifton

To be read and/or made available in all churches and chapels in the Clifton Diocese on the Feast of the Holy Family, 26 December 2010.