

Archbishop's Christmas Message to Parishes 2010

I was recently in Bethlehem. Today Bethlehem is no longer a village and in fact even considers itself a city. Indeed it is twinned with a rather larger city – Glasgow - and who would not be happy to be twinned with the birthplace of Christ?

There are caves and rocky overhangs all over the area and our guide advised us to look at a mosaic in the lovely little church which marks the shepherds' fields. There I saw sheep and goats tucked into a cave with shepherds forming a wall of protection gazing outwards into the night; these mosaic sheep and goats seemed well protected from the wolves.

Sadly today Bethlehem is surrounded by another wall, not to protect it from the wolves outside, but to protect the outside, the occupants of new settlements surrounding the city of Jerusalem, from what they perceive as the wolves of terrorism. And so today the citizens of Bethlehem, Palestinians of Catholic and Orthodox faith and Muslims too, must pass out daily to the fields or wherever they may be permitted to go, controlled as tightly as their forefathers were under the Romans and their client King Herod.

There are still sheep to be seen, but the town's chief source of income is in the carving of olive wood in the shape of shepherds and sheep and the other figures needed for cribs. They are found all over the world. These provide a vivid illustration of that first Christmas night when their forefathers saw light shining round them and heard the voices of angels declaring *Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to God's friends*.

At the heart of the town, under a colonnaded Basilica built by a Roman Emperor – on the site identified by an empress wife who hailed from York – is a series of caves one of which is identified by a silver star declaring: "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary".

In this Christmas period, protective of all that we hold dear, looking out into the darkness of an uncertain future, we may all look at the stars that brighten the heavenly canopy spread over us by a loving God and hear, even faintly, the song of angels. For we all long, not just those on either side of that wall at Bethlehem, for blessedness and peace. We all long for the realisation of that vision so beautifully described many centuries before Christ's birth by the prophet Isaiah:

"The wolf lives with the lamb, the panther lies down with the kid, calf and lion cub feed together for the little boy to lead them... The infant plays over the cobra's hole; into the viper's lair the young child puts his hand. They do no hurt, no harm ... for the country is filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters swell the sea". For this we pray.

And my good wish for you this Christmas is for every blessing on you and your families on the Feast and throughout the coming year.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

+Mario Conti
Archbishop

Note ad clerum: Please read out this message or print it in your newsletter, using it as a prompt to pray for justice for the Palestinian people and peace in the Holy Land and wherever, throughout the world, there is a need of the peace of Christ.