

*'I am the door. By me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved.'*

*Jn 10:9*

There has been a Holy Year every twenty-five years since the time of Pope Boniface VIII in the year 1300. And earlier this/yesterday evening our Holy Father the Pope opened the Holy Door in St Peter's Basilica in Rome with great ceremony and ritual to inaugurate the Holy Year of Jubilee 2025 and mark the 2,025<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth in Bethlehem of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Other Holy Doors will be opened at each of the remaining three major basilicas in Rome, St Mary Major's, St John Lateran's, and St Paul's Outside the Walls.

The origins of a Holy Year can be traced all the way back to the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament (Lev 25:8-55). A jubilee year was proclaimed in celebration of, and in thanksgiving for, the remission of all debts. All debts were dissolved, slaves were set free, and land was restored to its original owner as a reminder that all land properly belonged to God anyway and was only on loan to those who were using it now.

The whole year was to be sanctified, and all peoples and places. But such a restoration of property required sacrifice on the part of those who, up till that point, owned the property. And this brings us to the second strand of a Holy Year: a Holy Year is a time for actively *seeking* sanctification, especially through pilgrimage and penance. And to this end, a special Holy Year Indulgence is granted every twenty-five years to encourage God's Faithful to seek the face of God and restore to God that which we have failed to give Him in the past. In other words each Holy Year is a time for undertaking penances for the sins we have committed and, at the same time, for rejoicing in the goodness of God's merciful forgiveness.

Although the Church's year begins with the start of Advent, in fact Holy Years always begin on Christmas Eve with the beginning of the feast of the Birth of Our Lord. This

is not accidental, of course. A Holy Year usually marks the anniversary of the Incarnation, the coming into the world of the Son of God made flesh, and the beginning of the work of our redemption. (Although there was an extra Holy Year in 1933 to mark the 1,900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Our Lord's Passion and Death.)

It is the coming into this world as man, in a stable in Bethlehem, that saw the start of God's work that would bring about a reconciliation between the infinite and all-holy Creator on the one hand and the sinful human race that had alienated itself from its Creator on the other.

'For while all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, Thy almighty word leapt down from heaven from thy royal throne, as a fierce conqueror into the midst of the land of destruction.' So says the Book of Wisdom (18:14-15).

The night which was in the midst of her course is, of course, the night of human sin, and the land of destruction down to which God's Word leaps is our world with all the mayhem and pain and tribulation of a sin-tormented people. Just look at any news media headlines when you get home.

But the 'quiet silence' is the stillness of God's presence, a God who has not abandoned His people but has leapt down from His royal throne in heaven to be Emmanuel, to be God-with-us, in the thick of our troubles, anxieties, and sufferings, whatever shape they may come in.

This is what we celebrate each year at Christmas, and this is what we rejoice in whenever a Holy Year is proclaimed. Knowing ourselves to be sinners, we exalt in the fact that our God loves us even when our love for Him is weak or filled with doubt. With the angels we cry, 'Glory to the newborn King,' for He has come into a darkened world to bring light, and joy, healing and forgiveness, and, above all, hope.

Hope is the theme our Holy Father has chosen for the Holy Year. Not the vague wishy-washy hope that it might not rain tomorrow because we have planned a day out, or that I might pass my driving test in two weeks' time. No, the hope that we are talking about here is what the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament calls the anchor of our souls (Heb 6:18-19). Hope is what holds us secure in the love and the mercy of God even when the little ships of our lives are being tossed about on the stormy waters of this world. Hope in this sense is, as the Pope says, no 'naïve optimism but a gift of grace amid the realities of life' (*Spes non confundit*, no. 24).

We who do more than play seasonal jingles and pull empty crackers, we who celebrate the birth of Our Saviour this night/day can do what others cannot yet do: we can 'join the triumph of the skies [and] with th'angelic host proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem.'

This Holy Year, so new born, will be for those who will allow it to be, a time of rare and extravagant grace, a time of forgiveness and of holiness, and a time for being awash in the healing that the Christ Child brings.