Christmas Homily 2020.

A year ago tonight we gathered in this Cathedral, while people came together in churches all over the world, to celebrate the birth of Christ, our Saviour. We did so against the background of an economy which had a bumper season, an airport in Knock that welcomed thousands home for Christmas, houses that opened their doors to loved ones returning and an air of festivity that was normal for so many people; part of an established yearly pattern. ‘Save us, Saviour of the world’ was but a remote phrase, spoken in festive joy.

And suddenly, within ten weeks a tiny particle spread around the whole world bringing with it the destruction we have experienced since then; lockdowns and restrictions, fear and isolation, economic difficulties and challenges and most of all, the death of over two thousand people in our country alone; about half of them in nursing homes with no family members to comfort them. And ‘Save us, Saviour of the world’  became a reality deep within us, as we looked around for someone to whom we could turn.

On this night we celebrate again the birth of Christ our Saviour; the one sent by God to save us from ourselves and from our sins. And this year we can add to this, to save us from this virus and from the destruction that comes with it. In a real sense, therefore, this is a Christmas like no other, in so many ways.

Human reactions to catastrophes in the past, such as this pandemic, have been varied but they have also nearly always been marked in particular by a turning to God in prayer. And turning to God in prayer at a time of need is at the very heart of our relationship with God. It is at the centre of the way in which God makes himself known to each of us and deepens our faith. His response, which we so often find difficult to understand, in fact deepens our faith, once we are open to this. It is with this hope that we turn to him in prayer at this time of pandemic; ‘Save us, Saviour of the world’.

Sometimes we feel guilty and say to ourselves; ‘ I only turn to God when I’m in trouble’. But all through the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, God says to us, as he does in Psalm 50; ‘Turn to me in the day of trouble and I will save you and you will honour me’. And Jesus continued this.  When looking at the city of Jerusalem in its distress he said; “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Mt 23.37). The feast of Christmas highlights God’s love for us and is summed up by St John when he said; ’God loved the world so much that he sent his only son to be our Saviour’.

This year we will enjoy Christmas in a limited, restricted way; with family members absent, without the warm hug of grandchildren, possibly without the abundance of presents which normally litter our homes and possibly, even with less food. But, perhaps, the deep meaning of the Christmas message may also penetrate us, making us aware of it’s true meaning; God’s love for us which, despite all our difficulties, never changes.

And as this dark year of 2020 draws to a close, let us reflect on and enjoy the light which the birth of the child Jesus brings us this Christmas. Against the background of the fear, isolation, illness, lockdowns and deaths that have marked the past months, the five candles on the Advent wreath shine out, telling us that Christmas this year is profoundly meaningful. And for us, that meaning is found in the fact that the powers of darkness, illness, fear, isolation and death cannot and will not have the last word. The last word of 2020 is the fact that a Saviour was born over two thousand years ago and his salvation is as available to us today as it was then. No matter how long we have to endure the suffering of Covid-19, this virus will not have the last word. Jesus Christ was born on Christmas Day and he is the one who will save us.

And so let me end on a hopeful note; I think that, in years to come, when we look back on this pandemic we will be able to say; ‘in the long run, perhaps, we are all the better for it; it stopped some of the madness, gave us time, made us think, saved us from ourselves, made us better Christians and kinder human beings.’