

Christmas Eve Homily

The Church officially instituted the Feast of Christmas around the middle of the 4th century after the edict of Constantine which pledged freedom for the Catholic religion.

In ancient times, before the arrival of Christianity Rome celebrated a yearly event on 25th December known as 'the festival of the Invincible Sun.' According to their calculations this was the time of the Winter Solstice - the Sun appeared at its weakest but after that date it began to recover. Hence the name, 'invincible sun'.

As in other cases, the Catholic Church infused this Festival with a Christian significance - Christ is the invincible Son of God who by His coming into this world has overcome the darkness of sin and death. St Augustine puts it like this:

'We would have suffered eternal death, had Christ not been born in time. Never would we have been freed from sinful flesh, had he not taken on himself the likeness of sinful flesh. We would have suffered everlasting unhappiness, had it not been for His mercy. We would never return to life had he not shared our death. We would have been lost if he had not hastened to our aid. We would have perished, had he not come'. I tell you again: for our sake, God became man. (St Augustine)

The most powerful man in the world at the time of Christ's birth was Caesar Augustus and during his watch, which incidentally went on for 60 years, the Empire experienced a long period of peace known as the Pax Romana. Rome celebrated this by building a great peace monument which is still there in the Eternal City. But, unlike Caesar, the heavenly Prince of Peace, came into the world practically unnoticed and in a very unassuming way.

It is also ironic that the Saviour of the human race would eventually be disowned by the official Judaism of His

day. St John in the Gospel says: "He came to his own people but they did not accept him but to all who did accept Him he gave power to become children of God". The rejection by his own people reached its climax on Calvary. The angels introduced Him to the shepherds as the world's saviour and that includes you and me. Scripture says: 'God sent his son into the world, not to condemn the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved'. But because we have free will, it is within our capacity to reject him and the salvation which he offers us. Christ doesn't force his way into anyone's life. He leaves us completely free to accept His salvation or not.

And perhaps therein lies a pertinent message for us all this evening. The last Pope says that Christ was born in a stable in order to humble human pride. We have Christ at the centre of our Christmas when we are humble enough to accept his message of salvation and live by it. Then the light of the invincible Son of God will illumine our way to Heaven, our ultimate destiny.

