

## Comment

### *At the Gate of the Year*

One of the most memorable royal Christmas messages was delivered by King George VI in 1939. As the world was about to be scourged by the evils of a terrible war the King quoted from a poem by an obscure and unremarkable poet Marie Louise Haskins.

I said to the man who stood  
at the Gate of the Year  
'Give me a light that I may tread  
safely into the unknown.'  
And he replied 'Go out into the  
darkness, and put your hand into the Hand of God  
That shall be to you better than  
light, and safer than a known way.'

We are often successful in concealing the obscurity of our path. At significant moments we stop and take stock considering how we are to place our hands into the Hand of God. The road we travel is the one road with Abraham our father in faith and uncertainty. He too set out not knowing whither he went. According to Gregory of Nyssa it was 'precisely because he did not know whither he went that he knew he was going right, for then he knew that he was not being led by the light of his own mind, but by the will of God.' So, it is sometimes the case that we know we are going in the right direction only when we do not know where we are going.

At the Gate of the Year we are invited to celebrate the feast of Mary, the Mother of God. During the iconoclast crisis of the eighth century the removal of icons of the Virgin from above the gates of the city of Constantinople provoked anxiety and even riots amongst the populace. Gates are significant not simply as points of weakness in a city's defences they are also places of encounter between two worlds: the country and the town. Christian towns were places of habitation but they were also images of that heavenly city, Jerusalem our mother. Images of she who was the Mother of God and our mother were seen as protective symbols and reminders of how thin is the veil that separates time and eternity. We sing to this same woman as the '*felix coeli porta*' and refer to her as 'the window through whom the light was poured' and on occasion describe her as 'the window of the skies'. Yet she is also Mother of Mercy. On 1 January the Church asks that a special day of

prayer for peace and reconciliation be held. Mary, the Mother of Mercy, stands at the Gate of the Year and points to her Son, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Any thought of peace must involve some act of penance. Significantly the Pope's recent Apostolic Letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, on the *Coming of the Third Millennium* emphasises the importance of repentance. The year 2000 will be a Jubilee Year, a year in which the Holy Door of penance and forgiveness must stand open wider than in previous Jubilees because we are taking leave not just of a century but of a millennium. As the Pope says:

'It is fitting that the Church should make this passage with a clear awareness of what has happened to her during the last ten centuries. She cannot cross the threshold of the new millennium without encouraging her children to purify themselves, through repentance, of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency and slowness to act. Acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage which help us today to strengthen our faith, which alerts us to face today's temptations and challenges and prepares us to meet them.'

Later in the same letter the Pope invites us to consider the responsibility shared by so many Christians for grave forms of injustice and exclusion. This includes expressions of intolerance and violence in the service of truth. Mitigating factors do not exonerate the Church from the obligation to express profound regret for the weaknesses of so many of her sons and daughters who sullied her face, preventing her from fully mirroring the image of her crucified Lord. On the eve of the new Millennium Christians need to examine the responsibility they too have for the evils of our own day. The present age in fact, together with much light, also presents not a few shadows.

The approach of the new year and the drawing closer of the Millennium is to be marked by a penitent and not a triumphal Church. The shadows that have fallen across the gates of the City of God have included accounts of clerical dereliction and attempts at cover-up which have damaged further the integrity of the priestly office and the civic commonwealth. The resulting demoralisation and scandal have rendered any expressions of triumphalism absurd and called into question boastful claims of the arrival of a 'Catholic moment'. The Psalmist looks to the hills and asks from whence shall come his help. The answer comes "My help shall come from the Lord who made heaven and earth". The Holy Door of Mercy opened to us in the incarnation can be entered only by those who bend in penitence. Only then can we enjoy a true Jubilee.

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