

I recently enjoyed going on Pilgrimage to the Holy Land for the first time. One memorable moment was the visit to Bethlehem and in particular to the site of Jesus' birth marked by the Basilica of the Nativity. There is certainly a sense of joy at being at the spot where Our Lord was born and an opportunity to ponder the Mystery of the Incarnation and to give thanks to God for the gift of his Son's birth and the faith we have in the truth handed on to us by the evangelists and the tradition of the Church. Imitating those who first gathered to greet the Infant King - Mary and Joseph, shepherds and wise men - a sense of wonder and humble adoration on my, or our, part seems to be a fitting response to God's love for us, made present in the child in the manger. Wherever we are in the world the mystery of Bethlehem is recalled and comes alive each Christmas as we look into our own cribs and celebrate our faith in the Birth of Our Lord and Saviour in the Church's Liturgy. Thank God we are free to do so and we pray for those who are not as they suffer persecution for their faith, like the Innocents of Bethlehem killed by Herod after Jesus was born.

The people of Bethlehem today continue to bear their trials as the Palestinians seek to protect their presence and their rights while the State of Israel imposes its control over them. To a visitor the restrictions they live under seem excessive and demoralising and make one wish that a just and lasting settlement may be found to allow Palestinians and Israelis to live harmoniously together. The Child Jesus was hailed as the "Prince of Peace" prophesied by Isaiah and at Christmas we pray that peace may reign in his own land and in the troubled countries close by.

In our country also we pray for an attitude of peace and tranquility and for an acceptance of one another whatever our nationality or creed. May we who celebrate our Saviour's birth reach out to our neighbours and help build up and protect his kingdom among us.

I ask God's blessing for you and your families as we honour and adore Jesus, the Word made Flesh and Son of God.

+ Joseph Toal