

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Dear Parishioners,

The scenes of distress, confusion and dismay reported from Gatwick Airport on Thursday were bound to cast a damper on many a Christmas. One of our own parishioners had a flight at 09.00 on Friday; I only hope he managed to get away even if with a frustrating delay. Many of the thousands of needlessly inconvenienced people at Gatwick were getting away from our Christmas in the dark, cold north, but many were leaving to celebrate the same feast in warmer climes, and quite a few were going home to join relatives and family to celebrate Christmas with much the same joy and the same religious fervour as we are resolved to do here at home. They are visiting for Christmas. Some will be visiting family they have not seen in a long time, others will be staying with people who live alone and helping them to have a good Christmas, others again will be visiting the elderly, the lonely or the many who are overlooked at this time of year.

Visiting is at the heart of Christmas for so many people. Many people buy flowers, poinsettia or other plants, to cheer the home of a friend they visit, or they bring some brightly wrapped gifts to put under a lonely person's Christmas tree. Many too touch base, by card, phone, email or SMS, with friends with whom they have not been in touch for some time, and that too is often as good as a visit. Some people plan an *extra* visit, call to see someone they had not at first intended to visit, just because it is Christmas. We might think of taking a leaf out of the latter's book and visiting or contacting someone extra ourselves this Christmas.

Did Mary need to make that long journey from Nazareth to the hill country of Judah, I wonder? Was Elizabeth surprised to see her? Had she actually ever met her before? Had she ever laid eyes on this country girl from the north; did she know how they were connected? The older woman immediately detected that in this younger woman the prophecies, which were at the heart of the expectations of her people and foretold the providential design of God, were being fulfilled. She intuited that her young visitor was *full of grace*. Her husband had been visited by Gabriel, so she must have guessed that the girl from Galilee too had received an angelic visit. So many great artists depict the tender embrace of the two women, the evangelist Luke records some of their dialogue, but I like to speculate on what the two women did during the months they spent together. When we visit friends, conversation is important, but actually *being together* for a while, looking at one another across a room or in the glow of a blazing fire – just as W.B. Yeats looked at the eyes of Maud Gonne McBride – is as much a part of the grace of a visit. So, let us resolve to visit someone extra this Christmas, someone who would enjoy our coming to call, someone whose lives would be just that little bit different after we had left. Like the three wise men; so changed were they by their visit to Jesus in Bethlehem, they went home by a different route.

Father Patrick