**Christmas Message 2018**:

The well-known Christmas Carol *In the Bleak Midwinter* is based on a poem written by an English poet Christina Rosetti and put to music by Gustav Holst in 1906. It begins:

***In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,***

***Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;***

***Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,***

***In the bleak midwinter, long ago.***

It reminds us Christ was born in a world that was in its simplest terms, bleak. More than a hundred years later, from our vantage point, I suspect that we can still very readily identify with that word – bleak!

In the darkness of these winter days, nature itself seems to conspire to make us face up to this bleakness. The harshness of the weather and the barrenness of the fields, reinforce other cruel and harsh realities near and far. Those realities rhyme off like a litany - homelessness, poverty, the effects of our actions on the climate, the growing divisions between and within nations, fear and hostility towards migrants, and that’s just for starters.

And yet, the Christmas message is not at all about bleakness. The Christmas message is about hope and promise. It proclaims the eternal truth that the bleakness of the world is met and overcome by God who love’s us. *In the Bleak Midwinter* announces this truth with the gentlest of images - a new born child lying in a bed of straw, nursing at its mother’s breast. It sounds counter intuitive! But this is how God acts – in the most surprising of ways.

Through this infant child God became flesh and dwelt among us so that we could be touched by God’s love. This love cuts through the hardness of our world. Every Christmas we are each invited to welcome this love into our lives – a love that transforms the bleakness of our world if we let it. God is coming to us yet again. Can I, can you, can we, give God our hearts? If yes, then nothing will be impossible for us. Then, we can be part of unleashing God’s love into those bleak corners of our world. This is the hope and promise of Christmas – God is with us; God who loves us, and who calls each of us to fullness of life, is with us. Our Emmanuel.

***What can I give Him, poor that I am?***

***If I were a shepherd, I would bring him a lamb;***

***If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;***

***Yet what I can I give Him, give Him my heart.***

Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, reminds us that it is no use saying that we are born 2000 years too late to give room to Christ, nor will those who live at the end of the world have been born too late. Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts. But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that He speaks. It is with the feet of the people who are homeless that he walks and with the heart of anyone in need that He longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ.

Thank you for giving Christ to one another in the diocese. Thank you for the blessings you bring out in one another these festive days. Thank you for being you. Blessings and good wishes to all our priests, religious and lay faithful; blessings on the family of the diocese this Christmas time. May your Christmas be blessed with gentleness, peace and love this year.

Denis Nulty