Christmas Day 2010
Sermon preached by the
Right Reverend Paul Colton, Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross
in Saint Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork

'[T]the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid;…' (Saint Luke 2.10a)

Many among the senior generations will have lived through other Christmases dominated by fear. Other eras have known great uncertainty and have survived it. Some of you here, and indeed many who were alive at that time, will remember the Christmas Radio Speech of King George VI which was broadcast on this day in 1939. He quoted an until-then little-known poem 'God Knows' written by Bristol woman Miss Minnie Louise Haskins. She was a sociologist and philosopher, a teacher at the London School of Economics. Her words have stayed with many ever since:

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 better than light, and safer than a known way.'

Social fear of the kind we are witnessing and observing around us – or even feeling strongly within us – is somewhat foreign to present generations. But it is there. Bishop Buckley and I, in our joint Christmas message refer to it this year and to our sense of it in our midst.

It's a fear of the situation in which many already find themselves. It's a fear of what lies ahead. It's a fear of not knowing. Many are distressed. It is deeper than anxiety and goes beyond worry, but shares common ground with both. It is one of those innate human emotions such as joy, sadness and anger. Fear ranks among those. In a Gallup poll (2005) in the USA fear of the future ranked among the top ten fears among 13 to 15 year olds.

The fears we are hearing articulated are very real and menacing: will I have a job? Will I be able to live on what I earn? How will I afford my bills? Is my money safe? Where does my pension stand? NAMA, the banks, to default or not, IMF and ECB loans – these are a world beyond most of us but which now manifests as a grey freezing fog in every kitchen, sitting room and mind in the country. Will the economic system around us actually collapse? What is my house worth? We all know people, perhaps even ourselves, in very menacing difficulties. Some are paralysed by this fear: confidence is shattered. Morale is low. Many are running on empty.

For me, the economist Philippe Legrain sums it up well:

> '… banks were suddenly falling like ninepins, markets were plummeting and governments seemed overwhelmed. Was everything we took for granted falling apart around us?' he asks. And he answers:

> 'For a while, it seemed like it was. It was a terrifying mix of panic, bewilderment and powerlessness. It seemed surreal. How could everything just seize up like that? Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, our jobs, our savings and hopes for the future were in jeopardy.'

He uses the past tense – for many in Ireland, much of this is frighteningly still present.

But you may well say – "We came here today, we come to Church this Christmas Day to get away from all this stuff." I can understand that initial response. It's the reverse of the famous story – probably an urban myth – of the woman in central London on Christmas Eve, weighed down with Christmas shopping from glamorous stores, who walked, exhausted into the ever-open Saint James' Church in Piccadilly. She sat down and the priest who was about to conduct a Christmas Eve Service asked her if she was alright: I just needed a seat she said: I came in here to get away from Christmas!'

The Christmas Gospel is the opposite of escapism: far from side-lining the ordinariness of our lives and the dilemmas we face – it provides an epicentre, a focus for all that encompasses our humanity. The Christmas story is the very place to come at times like these. In this event, celebrated with joy each year, we see our reality and our humanity. The birth of Jesus - the incarnation – is where the promises of heaven and the struggles of earth meet. God shares our journey and participates in the muddiness and 'muddledness' of our human experience: 'The Word was made flesh and lived for awhile among us…'

And when it comes to fear, the Christmas story is full of it. That part of the world was itself a place of fear. About 60 years before, General Pompey had marched a Roman army into the region and after a three-month siege of the city took over Jerusalem. The troops desecrated the Temple and entered into the Holy of Holies. To the locals, the Roman invaders were unclean. They worshipped idolatrous gods.

This invasion wasn't a case of an idyllic land ruined by occupation either. This was an era of mixed feelings: the puppet Jewish King, put in place by Rome – King Herod – was a very able administrator. He dealt with the perennial problem of bandits. There was also the threat of anarchy and terrorism from a significant resistance movement. Herod oversaw the building of aqueducts, roads, amphitheatres, the city of Caseraea and, most important of all – the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem to its former glory. But he was ruthless. He was merciless with opponents: he even had his own three sons and his wife Marianne murdered. The massacre of the innocent children was entirely in character.

This was an uncertain world: political and religious instability and economic vulnerability for many. History repeats itself.

Into that world of fear all those centuries ago, the events of the nativity – the first Christmas – brought very real, personal and tangible fear: fear upon fear.

Mary – betrothed to Joseph, but their marriage bond has not yet been consummated. Her world turned upside down: unexpected pregnancy. How would she cope? How would she tell? How would she explain?

Joseph – getting ready to take that final step of the betrothed husband with his wife into the marriage home. 'What is Mary saying to me? Who's the father? What a fantastical explanation! What does it all mean? Where do I fit in now? God is asking too much of us.'

On top of all this with many other families there's a census and they have to travel to register – travel in the middle of winter – at this time of year and so close to the time when Mary is due. 'How will we get there? Where will we stay? Are they planning to use this information to tax us even more?'

The innkeeper – under pressure opportunistically to 'make hay' for his business – a full house – the last thing he needs is a deserving couple pulling at his charitable heart-strings when he is up to his eyes. The guilt of turning the away; the fear of losing business.

Wise men far away – the impulse and sense of having to make a journey – again the nuisance of travel but the compelling attraction draws them through the uncertain arrangements – following a star to God knows what.

Herod – afraid of opposition and political unrest – not afraid to massacre so many as a precautionary measure.

The shepherds – my favourites in the Christmas story – among the lowest in society because their work – touching dead animals, living among them and making contact with their dung makes them ritually unclean. They are the first outside the immediate family to be told the good news: not the rulers, not the powers that be, but the shepherds. The words of Mary's song already ring true, as they do again and again: ' he has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.' The birth of the Saviour is announced on a farm.

The shepherds, we are told, in today's Gospel 'were terrified.' God's messengers said to them 'Do not be afraid….'

The Christmas story is the place where our very real and understandable fears of the present time meet with the promise that God is with us. Across the centuries since that first hillside nativity the song of the Angels comes to us again: 'Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savour, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

The simplicity of that message of incarnation and of divine solidarity with our human lot gives great solace and strength to many. And so it ought. It is the assurance that God is indeed called Immanuel - God with us.'

In a demanding and rational world, many believers need more than that firm foundation of faith with its sturdy simplicity. They want practical strategy as a contemporary, tangible expression of the Christmas truth. It is for that reason that Christianity born in that stable is unavoidably political and inescapably involved in the life and concerns of human society. Some, even politicians and political commentators, chastise the Churches

for political engagement and urge retreat to the private, personal sphere. A Christianity that complies and which retreats in such a way is an emasculation of the incarnation, as well as of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Of course, we have to be humble and aware that we have no exclusive right to occupation of the market place. In today's Ireland and Europe, we share it with other faiths, other ideologies and many languages, cultures and sub-cultures. That must not scare us either: it should energise us.

As a practical outworking of a charter which trumps the prevailing culture of fear, might not we, his people and followers here in our time, make common cause with others – others of faith and of none; other institutions and agencies in society – to take a lead in helping people, in God's name, to face the challenges of our time. Could this be the charter of Christians in Ireland who, after all, are actively involved, in large numbers, in every sphere of Irish life and its so many discredited institutions, including the churches? Haven't we a key responsibility to help rebuild the credibility and effectiveness of all institutions – religious, political, social and commercial – restoring above all their role as servants of others rather than masters? Would this be one step towards obviating the fears of many in our society?

Don't we need also a social solidarity and community effort? Not one that we are so pretentious as to call 'unprecedented' – but modelled on and akin to those shown by other generations in the face of the adversities or seemingly insurmountable challenges of their eras. A socially combative spirit of helping others, giving others a hand, a shoulder to lean or cry on – all of this needs to characterise our path forward. In this way, to some extent at least, we all have the potential to become conduits God's presence to his people – messengers of God – which of course is what angels are.

I see some very likely angels - messengers of God, which is what an angel is - in this congregation here this morning. In whatever place you find yourself in society or community, in your own small way, you are well-placed to take the first steps.. The surprising thing is God can and does use us to be practical messengers of his joy, hope, love and good news.

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Go on! 'Be an angel!'