

## ...for a census...to be taken.

No doubt you're familiar with the words written above, which are taken from Luke's gospel, words which we will read at midnight mass in ten days time. No doubt too you'll have read the headline results of the 2011 census, which have just been issued. Much has been made of the 13% drop of those claiming to belong to the Christian faith, as well as the 15% rise of those claiming to have no religious affiliation. The results disclose that the percentage of the population declaring themselves as Christian now constitutes 59%. Of course such raw data is difficult to interpret, and whilst the first impression seems to demonstrate a stark reduction in Christian practice and belief, a reflective analysis is needed to understand what is being shown.

We can become obsessed by figures and statistics, and worry unduly about what they are telling us. If as the figures state, 33 million people in England and Wales claim they are Christian you may wonder where they all are, as they certainly don't seem to express their faith by going to Church every week! So let's not get hung up over these numbers, but rather let's look for something else in them which give us a basis on which to build and recognise that the Christian principles and values that our country is founded on still resonate in people's lives. I believe that we can tap into that resonance by looking at today's Gospel and by exploring the connection of what we long and hope for as individuals, as families and as communities, to the joys and hopes which the Gospel message proclaims.

In this Year of Faith, celebrating as it does the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Vatican Council we should recall the opening words of the seminal document of the Council *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope). Its opening claim is that "*the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.*" What a resounding declaration that is! One which if it is to have practical effect needs urgent implementation in all walks of life. Nearly two out of every three people we meet, claim a Christian heritage, and however loose or tenuous that claim may be, they nevertheless have expressed that their lives are touched in some way by Jesus Christ. They may not wish to do so any more publicly than by a tick in a box on a form, yet they have found enough courage to make that affirmation, and whilst for some that is as far as it will go, for others it may be the beginning of a journey to reconnect themselves with that faith.

The gospel tells us that a *feeling of expectancy* has grown amongst the people and I wonder if we can sense that too. To paraphrase the Chief Rabbi: *religion is at its best when it loses its power and instead uses its influence*. Influence which offers people an insight into a way of living that is not manipulative or devious, self seeking or exploitative, but is rather caring and loving, compassionate and consoling. A way of living based on truth and right, justice and peace, a way of living which is expressed in all its fullness by the Word made flesh.

We will come to celebrate the appearing of that Word made flesh in ten days time and our Churches will then be full of people. They are people who perhaps we won't have met before, but they are people who are seeking that joy and hope which Christ brings and offers through his love. On this *Gaudete* Sunday let us make ready and look to share this joyous Good News.