



Antwerp, December 17, 2018

***'Encounters around the Nativity Scene'
Letter from the Bishop for Christmas***

Good friends,

It's busy around the Nativity Scene. As the evangelist tells it, they all came there: the angels, the shepherds, and the three Wise Men. The shepherds brought their flock, their sheep and a sheep dog. The three Wise Men their beasts of burden, probably horses or camels. Who goes with whom? It's not a planned get together. They didn't come for each other. And even so, they are not in each other's way. There's no tension or bickering among them. They don't form parties or movements. They allow each other the time and the space to be with Jesus. They stand there as a new community, surprised to be at the same place. Peace and reconciliation radiate from them. Not only the child in the manger is new. The whole scene around Him is new. Everything there speaks about God who is beginning a new story.

How quickly don't we get in each other's way? With difficulty we put up with each other's thoughts and feelings. Our community looks like a chessboard. A chain reaction of strategic jumps and tactical positioning. Your chessman has to land on my square. We play until all the chessmen are either gone or taken, except mine. It counts as recreation; but in reality it's serious. The empty spaces in the world have become more numerous and rougher. I am impressed by the television series about a group of Flemish young people who went to different countries to live and work with people who are put to work as modern day slaves producing cheap Western export goods. The inequality can't be greater. All the chessmen have been pushed to one side.

Christmas is not only about a new-born child. It's also about a new community. Who will bring the divided leading actors of this world together again? Who will bring opposing groups, parties, peoples together? Jesus did not become man to push us farther apart. He became man to connect us again. Why are there animals around the Nativity scene? Maybe you have to be a sheep, a donkey or a camel to still believe that it can be: people who don't get in each other's way and disagree about each other's place. And what have the animals already experienced with the people? And still they're there. Naive and gullible.

What do I wish you for Christmas? A few surprising encounters, at home or on the street. Encounters with people who came or returned—because it's Christmas. People from your family or circle of friends, or just strangers, maybe from the East or the

South. At Christmas Jesus performs His first miracle, even without words: He brings people together who perhaps came for Him but who were not looking for each other.

Merry Christmas!

+ *John Bonny*

Bishop of Antwerp