

Midnight Mass 2018

If you read them, it is striking just how radiant the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel are. The Gospel writer leads us on a journey as he explores the births; first of John the Baptist – the great forerunner – the one who will prepare the way for the Ministry of Jesus, and then of Jesus himself. We are taken into another mindset, another world; one of angelic revelation, one where the natural order of humanity is turned upside down. He lays out the radical imagery of a God who can be seen at work in the humblest of circumstances. In the words of the Magnificat, Luke has the Blessed Virgin Mary uttering this powerful manifesto: 'God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.'

True power for Luke is nothing to do with money, power or control. Quite the opposite! It lies in the recognition that we are to see in each other's faces the presence of God and to allow ourselves to transform each other through divine love. Indeed, the whole tenor of our continuing relationship and understanding of God's Love is revealed in the face of one of us. The baby, formed in the womb of his mother, held in the same amniotic fluid as each one of us, born just like you and me, is the reason we celebrate the knowledge of this deepest connection of the presence of God within our lives. We heard at the end of our Gospel reading the song of the Angelic Host crying out to those shepherds – people beyond the pale, people at the edge of society - 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill to all people!'

God, who is beyond our understanding and comprehension reveals the depth of love for humanity in creation by reaching through time and space as Jesus is born and shares our earthly life in exactly the way as each of us. From womb to tomb, God says to us, 'I reveal my love-story to the world - Jesus - to show you my love. I have loved each one of you since before you were born and I will never cease to love you, and the Anointed One - my Son - is born to show **how** much I love you.'

The prophet Isaiah captures an ecstatic understanding of this, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus: 'To us a child is born! to us a son is given. And his name shall be Wonderful Counsellor, mighty God! Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.'

We have seen many sorrows throughout this year, both through human hands and restless nature. the brokenness of humanity – a tragic sign of the factions: tribal, ethnic and religious difference; the greed and desire for power and of innocent lives shattered or ended. Trumpery and the mad world of American politics; violent disorder on the streets of Paris and Brussels; the re-emergence of both far right and extreme left-wing ideologies in Europe and other parts of the world; the continuing normalisation of relations with nations whose regimes and nations persecute and oppress Christians and people of other faiths: China, Turkey, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi-Arabia, Russia. In our own country ructions and divisions surrounding Brexit; the feebleness of much our political discourse together with its increasingly divisive nature. What is to be done? What is the answer, and what is our part to play within that answer?

In a world where so much is wrong, the reason we gather together in this church tonight provides us with the answer. The gift of Jesus to the world is God's **comfort** to each one of us here tonight, and indeed to **all** people. But more than this, is the **hope** which Jesus reveals through his life and ministry. He reveals that God is present with us no matter what; and that comfort transcends humanity's divisions of race, religion and culture. It is unsolicited and unconditional mercy, grace and love on the part of God.

Christmas reveals the way in which God bursts into our lives in the most unexpected way to reveal that love. And that is why, my friends, gathered as we are in this ancient place, as countless generations have done before us, we celebrate the birth of the **darling** of the world who ultimately gives himself entirely for each of us through Passion, Death and Resurrection; the one who draws each of us to new life here and now. Tonight we celebrate the moment when the entire mystery of the universe is contained and revealed in a small human movement, in the cry of a new born baby in the night, when heaven and earth touch each other. This is a call to us to bring God's mercy, grace and hope into every aspect of our lives, into every interaction which we have with other people.

God's mystery of love doesn't just happen at a distance. Mystery happens right here, right now, right in the middle of everything. It matters not **who** we are - his love is there for each of us – with no strings attached other than the desire to draw us on a journey further into his love and to reveal that love within our own lives. If that isn't the best present in the world, I don't know what is. We are called to transform the world in whatever way we can through love. This is the core of our faith.

God invites us to lift our eyes to the horizon, and to bring them down to our own doorsteps, our own bodies, our own lives. Tonight as we celebrate the birthday of Jesus, we begin to get the idea that God desires to create radiance in every moment of everything we look to and seek to do, in hope and expectation even in the face of sometimes intolerable circumstances. None of us will be untouched by sorrow, sickness or the endeavours of others to inflict terrible things. Yet in the face of Jesus, we have the answer that tells us that we are never alone. Emmanuel – God is with us – with us every step of our journey.

We are called to transform the world, to give hope to those who have given up, to raise up those who are fallen, to help the broken – in other words, in the words of St Catherine of Siena that, ***“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”***

As we remember those words, let us welcome him again into our hearts wholeheartedly and seek to reveal the mystery of his love in the way **we** touch the world through our own lives.

A blessed Christmas to you all, and a very happy New Year.



Carlo Dolci 1616-1686

Isaiah 9:2-7

² ^[a] The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood

shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Titus 2:11-14

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,^[a] 12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour,^[b] Jesus Christ.
14 He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Luke 2:1-14

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.
8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.
12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
14 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'