

## Midnight Mass 2019

I hope that you aren't disappointed in not hearing either of the Gospel accounts of the Lord which we associate with the birth of the Christ. You have heard nothing of Matthew or Luke's vivid reflections on the birth of Jesus, with their wondrous ability to capture our imagination and lead us on a journey via stars, angels, wise men, shepherds, wicked kings and all those other things we associate with the Christmas story. Virtually all of our Christmas carols find their inspiration in these two accounts, so we may feel a bit short-changed tonight with three readings which seem to bear no relation to our celebration?

In fact, all three eloquently shout out the central message of God's love for humanity and the way in which ultimately this is revealed in the fullness of grace through the birth of Jesus Christ.

The prophet Isaiah sets the ball rolling when he speaks words of comfort to a broken and devastated people and nation. In the midst of calamity and ruin, and, speaking many hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah announces not just peace but transformation for the Children of Israel, Transformation which will be seen to the ends of the earth. He gives us the understanding that this good news will be open to all humanity, and although he is dealing with a certain situation in time and place, the resonance of his words speak to us across the millennia. Could he have possibly envisaged that this abiding of God's Love in 'plain sight' would end up revealed in the birth of a boy in Bethlehem; the call to humanity to journey through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to find the fulness of life itself?

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews did, and he draws us to a cosmic understanding of the Lord, **'the reflection of God's glory'** – in whom the very DNA of the Creator of all that exists is to be found. In the piling up of image upon image the writer draws us to recognise the uniqueness of the Son who dwells at the 'right hand of the Majesty on high,' yet who was born exactly like us in time and place.

So we are led to John's great Prologue at the beginning of his Gospel. In a passage unparalleled within the Bible, we see his take on the Christ where we find no mention of a stable, a manger or even the **name** of the child whose birth we mark tonight. Instead, we have John's reflection of 'the Word,' an intense theological exploration which sets the scene for the whole of his book. When John starts talking of the Word -or Logos- of God, he is speaking of the Wisdom of God – something which is powerfully represented within the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is, if you like, an aspect of God's Love – pre-existent to creation and almost beyond our understanding. As I have said before, when John starts this reflection, we are not to see the Word as representing Jesus – at least not yet. Indeed, John paints an understanding that the Word is something which is open to creation and humanity. Wonderfully, he describes the Word as being the true light that lightens every human being – so, lightening people of good will throughout the ages in every time and place; philosophers of every age, artists, scientists, doctors, musicians, ordinary women, men and children – all who reach out with goodness – all exercising their own creativity to enrich other people's lives and all

revealing the beauty of God in their own ways. Through this, we are drawn into the life of God in an extraordinary way – a gift beyond compare. In doing what we can to make the world a better place, we reveal the light that shines through human history in the face of darkness. It is at this point that we are jolted to the knowledge of the fulness of God's love for us in one sentence: **And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.**

That's it. One sentence. That's John's birth narrative of Jesus. The unity of Love which God desires to share with each one of us is made known in the face of Jesus Christ – utterly rooted within our humanity – the same flesh as each of us. Through his life, his passion, death and resurrection, we are shown how God longs for us to be drawn into lives of self-giving love as Jesus himself showed – to live lives of resurrection. It is from Jesus that we learn how to allow the Wisdom of God to abide and work within our own lives.

Jesus embodies all that we can understand of God within a human life. We see the fulness of glory in a birth in that stable in Bethlehem, in the life of one who served others and washed their feet; one who sought out those considered 'lost' to lead them on a journey to find their true selves; one who challenged corruption and injustice and even proclaimed forgiveness from the cross itself. It is in following him that we too find fulfilment of who we are called to be.

We seem to be living in tumultuous times; from the challenges of political change around the world, not least within our own nation to worries over climate change. We are ever more aware of many areas of brokenness within society, compounded by the rise of so-called social media. We are worried, because we see a world where the innocent and vulnerable seem to fall into the hands of the unscrupulous and manipulative. There is disconnection within society and even within families on a scale never seen before. How can we respond? What can we take away from this service tonight which will enable us to function and - more importantly - to thrive within this topsy-turvy world we inhabit?

**Total connectedness.** What we heard in our three readings is the absolute confirmation of identification and accompanying of God within every facet of our lives in the face of Jesus Christ. We are offered connection to the fulness of life itself. Faith offers the solution to our broken society, to the stresses and strains within both our own lives and those we interact with. There are **no** barriers to God's love. None whatsoever. All that is desired is the wish to be led on a journey of expectation and loving our neighbour as our self; to see in the face of all those we meet someone who is equally loved by God. Sometimes this is difficult, and we may struggle - yet we are never alone – he is with us on every step of our journey. This is how we find our true selves.

It is no mistake that since the earliest days of the Church, the most important act of worship for Christians is gathering around a table. That is what we do tonight, no matter how grand it may look or how the whole thing is dressed up. A simple meal, at which we share bread and wine – the fruits of creation and work of human hands. All are welcome at this table. We come with our flaws, our weaknesses and baggage and are called to know God's abiding presence and healing within our lives – here we meet Jesus, the true and living bread, and we leave strengthened by the one who gave himself for each of us.

The birth of this child represents the start of a life which ultimately transformed broken humanity through self-giving love. He calls **you** to share in his risen life of transforming the world - the richest journey you can ever make. My friends, enable his love to work within all that you do. You will never regret it.

A very happy and blessed Christmas to you.



*Adoration of the Shepherds - Matthias Stomer, 1632*

### **Isaiah 52: 7-10**

<sup>7</sup> How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,  
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

<sup>8</sup> Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,  
together they sing for joy;  
for in plain sight they see  
the return of the Lord to Zion.

<sup>9</sup> Break forth together into singing,  
you ruins of Jerusalem;  
for the Lord has comforted his people,  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

<sup>10</sup> The Lord has bared his holy arm  
before the eyes of all the nations;  
and all the ends of the earth shall see  
the salvation of our God.

### **Hebrews 1: 1-4**

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. <sup>3</sup> He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

### **John 1: 1-14**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.