

# *Midnight Mass*

It's lovely to be here in Wollaton on Christmas Night, but I think for a rather curious and special reason.

At Christmas, and at many other times recognised as religious moments, people experience a desire to do things they've done before at the same time. When we baptise a baby or celebrate a wedding we almost grotesquely imitate what happened last time: funerals, I suppose, put the tin lid on this tendency. It's as if *by imposing a pattern* we can try to contain the frightening newness of what is happening. The danger is that we kill ourselves off, and just do things by rote because that's what gets you through.

This in fact is the situation we find in Britain tonight. Every house is primed to look the same - tinselly, shiny, celebratory - every cocktail cabinet is awash with unaccustomed stingo, and under every valance lie hidden the gifts which will try to make people feel rich and loved, no matter how dull and taken-for-granted we might have felt yesterday.

We'll all have overdone the prep. Tomorrow night the rats of Old England will feast on over-bought smoked salmon!

The fact that most people have either forgotten why we're doing this, or never knew in the first place, means that many feel trapped into this behaviour, and are only doing it because it is playing the game: many suspect they are themselves playthings of powerful commercial interests, victims of the advertisers. Beneath the whiff of the gin is a sour taste of sadness, a sense of disappointment. I'm told the Queen thinks the economic downturn is going to make us all feel "sombre".

But none of this is true about us. We are out of our beds at midnight: we're in a state of contradiction! We have set our faces against this night being a repeat performance of something we've always done. For us, tonight is a cutting edge, a new moment, a time of the Lord's favour: this is the night when earth and heaven are wedded, and it is all new and gloriously relevant. It is precisely because we *haven't* done it all before that we're doing it tonight. This is the "today" when the will of God can take flesh and change everything for us. So forget the past, and the stage-coach and the Victorian Christmas: the sun has moved in the heavens, and the tide has turned for us, and here is the news!

This is the real reason why I'm glad we're here. We're in the right place - in front of an *altar*, which is a place of sacrifice. Let us sever with the sharpest of blades what bonds us with the lonely past, and let this new dawn take us into a new life. Did I mention bloodshed just then? I think so. Flesh and blood - there's excitement! - and the eternal

power of the love of God - there's the magnetic attraction of Christmas. Everything which thrills and grips us about being human: the risk of it, the dangerous beauty, the powerful attraction - is caught up in the hand of the Eternal God who created it in love: in the tiny form of a human child, the mighty Trinitarian being is revealed before our astonished eyes, not exalted and beyond us, but in our presence, in our field of vision: we can pick him up and hold him, seven-and-a-half-pounds avoirdupois, with a rustle of fragrant hay, wrapped in a tight swaddling of warm wool. Suddenly the love of Mary and Joseph appear to us, totally new and unheard of: the love of parents, certainly, but brought about by what a birth! Every birth is a miracle; every birth is completely new and unprecedented: it is no place for tradition, for doing what was done last time. But this birth is powered with meanings which make it vital for every life that will ever come to be on the face of the earth.

The first reading from Isaiah tonight has always been one of my favourite pieces of the Bible. It expresses the amazing sense of Scripture that the most massive consequences in history are accomplished by the power of grace and not by the powers of violence or hatred: light shines forth into shadow, gladness flows out across the fields of sorrow, harvest and sharing bursts into the hands of the poor, the heavy burdens of oppression are shattered: the footgear of battle, the cloak rolled in blood are burnt by fire - and all of this because of the birth of a child, the coming of a baby who will carry the beneficent power of his dominion into this world that has devoured its children.

The figures who first inherit this Gospel in the liturgy are the quiet shepherds, poor men whose place is out on the cold hillside, caring for the sheep as they rest. It is their sky that is rent asunder to reveal the uncountable hosts of the sons of God chanting his praise for creation and salvation. Everyone who has any care at all for the world and its people will feel called to wakefulness by this story: we who love and cherish hope and faith for the world and its people must be transfigured by the wonder of this vision, and find rest and delight in the knowledge that the army of God is in its place, that the die of salvation is finally cast, that our story has crossed over into the time of its fulfilment.

It is no time for falling back to sleep. This vigilant moment has its impulse and its errand: there is a sign for you to seek: a child wrapped in swaddling-clothes and laid in a manger.

You need to know your Bible to read this sign. It was Solomon the Wise King, meditating on his humanity, who pointed out that he was swaddled on coming into the world, just like every other mortal. And it was Isaiah, the great prophet, who pointed out that the ox and the donkey recognised their master's manger by coming to it to be fed, whilst Israel wandered hungry, not acknowledging their Lord at all. It is to contradict that statement that these shepherds will be called to the manger; it is to find the humility of the Lord of the Universe that they will look on him swaddled, the Wisdom of God made flesh, wrapped and confined in the tiny life of a human child.

Yet this is the utter, final defeat of the fire and bloodshed of the past, the iron yokes and torments of war: this is the quiet coming into the world of the Lordship that will bring us to glory in God. To show that he is beside us, we shall hear him cry with cold and hunger,

loneliness and uncertainty; knowing all the while that the unerring hand of the Father is laid on him, guiding and cherishing him as he moves in our midst. He will pray as we pray, and struggle as we do, choosing what is right, discerning what is good.

Every living move that he makes will be for us the image of God searching to find *us*, where we lie locked in grief or fear, mistrust or despair. His touch will bring signs of healing and enlightenment, fidelity and hope to real people in real moments of trial; he will teach us to trust in virtues and to come to life. His wisdom grows in our world with the secrecy of a buried seed; the dewfall is its tending, and the earth brings it forth inexorably, as God has designed. But its humble power will contradict the empires of the earth, and the heavens will answer with their proclamation of glory, whose span will extend through all the world: in the heights of heaven, glory to God; and in the lowest places of the planet, peace to all whom God has called to life. This birth excludes no-one, and gathers us all into one promised joy. The simplicity and universality of a human birth has the power to summon all who share in humanity. Let us forsake all that divides and torments us, and let him be our Lord and our hope. May he guide us out of our loneliness and separation, and into a common life that will heal the Creation by the entry into it of the eternal love of God.