

CHRISTMAS 2018 – MIDNIGHT MASS

MAKING NEW AN OLD STORY

Seven year old Judy, was entrusted with carrying the baby Jesus in procession at Midnight Mass while everyone sang 'Away in a manger'.

Her contribution to the service, quite unplanned, was to drop him ...

'Never mind Judy' said the Vicar, 'let's pick him up'.

'We can't', she announced. 'His head's come and rolled under the piano'.

It brought a new meaning to the line, 'lay down his sweet head'!

This story, told by a priest I know, expresses the mixture of solemnity and chaos, beauty and silliness which makes Christmas what it is.

We make every effort, at home and at church, to try and express something – although we are not always quite sure what that is.

How can we speak adequately about Christmas?

Of the bringing together of God and humanity?

Of the mystery of the Word made flesh.

And how do we do it in a way that is fresh and surprising when we have heard it all so many times before?

That you are here tonight, suggests that this story still has something new to say to you – even after so many years.

But what if it was all new?

Just imagine you *are* one of the first Christians for whom these stories were strange and shocking – not old and familiar as they are to us.

LIBERATION FROM ISOLATION AND FEAR

But there are people who haven't heard the Christmas story before. I wonder, how it might sound to the tribe living on North Sentinel Island in the middle of the Indian Ocean?

You might remember, back in November, the news of an American man – John Chau – who was attacked with arrows, and his body dragged into the jungle. It emerged, that one of his reasons for going there was to share the Christian faith with this tribe.

Now, there are many reasons why he was foolish and perhaps wrong to do what he did. For a start, it was illegal, and he put them at risk from disease. Also, missionary work like is weighed down with a lot of post-colonial baggage.

But just for a moment, put that aside, and consider what he was *trying* to do. He wanted, to share with these people a story they had never heard before. He believed (and perhaps you and I believe this too) that this story brings people life and hope – and that this is worth having – perhaps at all costs – as he discovered.

In so many ways, we are different from the North Sentinelese.

But in so many ways, we are the same.

We may not fight people off with bows and arrows – but we hold off God with more sophisticated weapons. There is a tribal instinct of fear and isolation within us too.

As Saint John describes: *'He came to his own and his own people did not accept him'*.

The news of our liberation from isolation and fear is both joyous and disturbing. It means letting go of old certainties and welcoming new possibilities.

It disrupts the pattern of our lives – and this is uncomfortable.

We, who always want to be safe, comfortable and in control are confronted by the very opposite of all we are trying to be.

The message of our freedom is presented in the form of a child – weak, vulnerable homeless and lying on a prickly bed of straw.

One of the messages of Christmas is that we don't have to live in isolation and fear and aggression anymore - because God has come to us.

We can live differently – individually and corporately - because of it.

I suspect that 2019 will be an important year for all of us.

As we redefine what kind of people we are and what our island nation is about.

Do we live in fear and isolation?

Or do we live in a way that shows how the Child of the Manger has set us free from tribal instincts?

CARRYING THE LIFE OF GOD WITHIN US

This year we have marked the end of the First World War.

But there's another centenary linked with it.

The first service of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge.

The connection may be surprising.

But the end of the war was a time of exhaustion and despair.

How had it come to this?

Could we recover from the loss and grief, the wounds of body and soul?

Many thought not.

But the Bidding Prayer, written by the Dean – Eric Milner-White – *seeks to 'tell the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious redemption wrought us by this Holy Child'*.

It is honest about our failure, but also hopeful about our future.

The popularity of this service lies in the story it tells.

The darkness is not irreversible.

There is another story of hope.

Our human nature; bruised, damaged and disfigured as it is, is still capable of bearing the life of God. In the Child of the manger, God has united himself to us forever – and the light that shines in the darkness can never go out completely.

Milner-White was not writing from a detached perspective.

As a Military Chaplain he had seen violence and death close up – but he also believed this was not the whole story.

So the Bidding Prayer reminded a war-weary world that all those 'whose hope was in the word made flesh' are now with the God who first came to be with us.

It is a story of a journey back to where we belong.

Back to the people we are meant to be.

Both more human and more divine – and all and only possible because of the Child of the manger.

THE DIGNITY OF THE SAVIOUR'S LOVE

We call this child a 'saviour'.

From childhood we read stories about heroes who will come and sort things out for us.

In other words, people who will take away the burden of responsibility from us and put it elsewhere.

Maybe that's why, even as adults, we find it so hard to escape from this pattern. We create politicians and leaders on whom we load all our expectations – only to discover (when they fail) that they are human too.

But this 'saviour' is different.

Yes, he saves, after all that is the very meaning of the names 'Jesus'.

But he does it differently.

The people of Israel were expecting a hero who would crush the Roman Empire.

He would come with righteous anger like an invading army.

But Christ comes not to take over but to transform.

To transfigure not to destroy.

He comes in gentleness - as a shivering lump of flesh to love us into life.

This is how he saves us.

He takes our human nature, and raises it up, making each one of us a new creation. He gives us the dignity to make changes and choices that will make real the depth of divine love for the world.

I've seen this for myself.

On a recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land, a group from this church visited Bethany (a town Jesus knew well).

There, in a school run by a Christian family, was a boy of about 11 years of age.

When he arrived at the school, he would cower on the floor every time someone said his name.

Do you know why?

Back at home, his name was only used when he was beaten.

But now, in this place, he had learnt that his name was not a prelude to pain, it held no fear – instead it was a call of love.

When the teacher introduced him to us, he stood up straight and smiled.

This is what it means to give someone dignity.

This is what it means to raise up our humanity and make it new.

This is the salvation of the word made flesh in action.

He laid down his sweet head so that ours might be raised up in dignity and hope.

EVER ANCIENT, EVER NEW

We have heard this Christmas story so many times before, but

If we listen to it carefully -

If we hold it in our hearts –

It's meaning will unfold in our lives in ways that never end.

It becomes the pattern for our lives, the reason for our being.

This is the story, ever ancient and ever new

The mystery of the word made flesh

The Child of the Manger.