

Midnight Mass 2017
St Michael & All Angels, Barnes.

MAKING VISIBLE THE LOVING HEART OF GOD

A few weeks ago,
a child was born
with its heart outside of its body.

It was born
holding its heart
in the palm of its hand.

In the hours after birth
the medical team worked to place
the heart inside the child's chest.

Against all odds
the child survived,
and among the names they gave her
was Hope.

It's a powerful image -
a child holding its own heart.
There's a Christian image that's very similar.
known as the Sacred Heart of Jesus,
and it shows Christ holding his beating heart in his hand.
It's message is simple:
Jesus is the love of God's heart.
The message of Christmas is much the same:
What was hidden is now revealed,
this child is the making visible of the loving heart of God.

REMADE IN LOVE

When Saint John writes, 'In the beginning', as we have just heard, he's talking about God in a way that no one has ever spoken about God before.

The whole of his Gospel is about Jesus the 'word' – the Logos – who is God's own expression of himself.

What we see in Jesus,
Is what God is like.

What do we see?

In the Old Testament God reveals himself through Ten Commandments – the Decalogue.

In the New Testament God reveals himself through Jesus – the Logos.

From rules to a person.

From obligations to a relationship.

Jesus the word.

One little word.

But we don't read this word.

It reads us.

Showing us who and what we are –

Fragile, tender creatures, carrying our hearts around in our hands,

Wanting and needing to be loved.

Because in the end, that's all any of us really wants and needs.

St John says he was 'in the beginning',

Long ago,

But he is also our beginning again here and now.

Something new,

this child remakes us.

All our mistakes, all our stupid mistakes don't matter any more because of this child,

who is the beginning and our new start.

This is the child of whom we sing:

*'Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth'.*

To begin again

We are remade in love.

GOD WITH US

Like me, I'm sure many of you have been watching series two of The Crown. In one episode Lord Altrincham accuses the Queen of being cold, distant and elitist. The world has changed, he says, and people need a new kind of sovereign, one that is closer to the people.

That is how many people in our world today view God – as cold, distant, elitist.

And the Christian faith as something for a former time, that we don't need any more.

But for all of us here tonight, we know that *nothing* could be further from the truth.

In the birth of Christ, God as come close to us.

Among us.

As one of us

God with us.

This is not a God who has to be persuaded to like us through pleading or good behaviour.

This is a God who can't help but overflow with delight into the world that he has made.

Far from being distant,

he could not be closer or more like us.

Coming from heaven to earth

that we might go from earth to heaven,

MAKING HIS HOME IN OUR HEARTS

I remember, as a child, putting out the Nativity set under the Christmas tree at home.

Made of plastic, straw and wood, it was great fun to arrange the figures, as if they were toys.

But these were far more than toys.

When we put out our nativity sets at home or in church,

We are performing the words of St John:

'And the word became flesh and lived among us.'

He lives among us.

Dwells with us.

The homeless one finds a home in our hearts,

And we are at home in his.

As the poet G K Chesterton wrote:

*'A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless,
Are you and I at home'*

God is with you – where are you with him?

However you feel about Him,

Whoever you are,

still he comes.

What we are celebrating at Christmas is that God wants to get to know you –

Because he values you beyond all imagining.

THE FIRST CHURCH

The scene of the stable is so familiar that we tend not to notice who is there:

A teenage mother.

An old man.

Some peasants.

And some foreigners.

These are the people that the Lord gathers around himself at his birth.

And if we might describe Mary as the first Christian,
(As the first person to ever say 'yes' to Jesus when the angel asked
her to be his mother)
so we might describe the Stable as the first church.
The first group of people who gathered to worship Christ.

From that little stable,
To this great barn of a building,
There isn't really much difference.
We are here to do the same thing.
and for the same reason too -
to kneel, worship and adore a mystery,
A heart of love
Made visible.

Our church and community must contain the same diversity.
It is not a club for members, but a home for everyone.
The wealthy, comfortable, just managing and impoverished.
The educated, ignorant, wise and illiterate.
Posh, common, old, young, gay, straight, black, white, male, female,
transgendered, able and disabled – people 'like us' and 'not like us'.
This is the holy people of God.
This is who Christ gathered around himself in the Stable.
Who he has gathered around himself tonight.

A VISION OF HOPE

And the child born with its heart in its hand -
even as they named her 'Hope'
others were turning out the lights in Bethlehem as a political protest.
Many of you might also feel that this has been a year of growing
darkness.
One in which the world has become more frightening and uncertain.
A world of enforced migration, poisonous ideologies and
fragmenting alliances.

In a world of fake news and retweeted hate, how can we sing with the angels of peace and good will? What hope do they really bring? But this is the world God came to save.

The context has changed, but the reality is the same.

Parents will tell you that a child changes their life.

This child changes all our lives.

Because of him we are not a lost cause.

The temptation is to respond to the world using the old narrative.

The tired track of fear and anger, defence and offence.

But Christmas sings a new story,

In which the capacities of human life have been redefined.

There is a vision of peace that can never be obscured.

There is a light that can never be put out or turned off.

In Bethlehem, the loving heart of God was made visible.

And the heart of that child in the manger beats for you.

A child we call Jesus - whose other name is hope.