

MIDNIGHT MASS, PORTSMOUTH CATHEDRAL

CHRISTMAS EVE 2013

It is at last Christmas! The time is past for tinsel and trimmings both tasteful and taste-less, for commercialism albeit with only 24 hours respite, and for conflicts glossed over for the sake of good will to all. But here in the darkness, at this uniquely timed service, we have the opportunity to name things as they are, to cherish the beauty and the shock of Christmas. In the depths of the night we tell each other the truth.

In the depths of the night all those years ago, Herod was plotting to murder the innocent babies who threatened his grip on power. In the depths of the night today, armies launch their raids, and hostile forces gather strength to make their assault. In the depths of night our dreams bring to our consciousness realities that we pour all our daytime energy into suppressing. Niggling worries, anxieties about family or health or work or money or global disaster, surface in the darkness to nag at us and destroy our peace.

And so it is good and right that in the depths of this night we gather here, struggling through darkness and cold and the heaviness of sleep, to hear those wonderful words of defiant, joyful hope: “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” That hope is here now, vulnerable in its newness, yet powerful beyond any hostile force or conflict or hurt, claiming its place in our hearts and challenging all the wrongs of the world.

And we come in numbers. Many daily and weekly churchgoers, lay and clergy, find it difficult sometimes that our churches are full at Christmas, as if there were something wrong or surprising that many want to come to this celebration. We have come to be as close as we can to this vulnerable voiceless baby – the Word of God but unable to speak a word – in a squalid makeshift delivery room far from home and family love, visited by rough sleepers and suspiciously foreign worthies. Odd and unlikely as it may seem, we meet tonight the hope for us all. In a world besmirched by injustice, suffering and violence, and amidst our private griefs and hurts that we all invisibly bear, here is the answer to our deepest questions in a tiny new-born baby. As we gather tonight, for a moment in time, utter purity of love and beauty rests upon us and makes all of us whole and good.

Of course everything won't change overnight. This isn't about naïve wishes for instant fixes or superficial remedies. In the fullness of time, as we are reminded in the letter to Hebrews, after a long history of prophecy and preparation, God sent his Son. From tonight a further thirty years must pass before the infant will appear to the world, acknowledged publicly as God's Son. And years must still pass again before we see the completeness of his reign here on earth. Even as we pay homage to the promise of peace in our world, the wars that ravage our world continue. Even as our hearts dare to kneel and embrace the source of healing and reconciliation in our own lives, we know that in the cold light of day life may look very much as it does now. That waiting, which the church so sanctifies and sanitises in the month of Advent, is often frustrating and frequently cruel.

Our impatience at the bus stop contrasts with the degradation of those who wait in line at military checkpoints in Bethlehem and elsewhere. We who complain with frustration at the checkout queue recall tonight the humiliation of those who seek a job but cannot find one. As we read with glib familiarity Mary and Joseph's search to find any room we remember people without the security of home or health, those who yearn to conceive but cannot,

prisoners of conscience who long for justice as well as freedom, and all who wait for asylum, opportunity and hope in our bent and often cruel world.

In the awesome wonder of this dark night we glimpse a tiny light from an obscure filthy stable. Hopeful, healing vulnerability touches us and our world and, pray God, transforms us. Tonight reminds us that this baby can bring change and hope. Love takes flesh tonight. When love is incarnate in us then little by little, whether or not we are significant or influential, the world is transformed beyond our imagining.

This is not the night to be challenged by the preacher – though at times all preachers will and must – but to see possibilities and open your hearts and your minds to them. The heavens have opened and God is here. Love is present to us, here and now, in all its fullness of beauty and joy and vulnerable power. We meet in the audacious certainty that ultimately, this very love will shine through the worst that humanity can inflict on itself, lighting the world so powerfully that the darkness cannot overcome it. And so we join with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven this holy night, to sing the glorious song of God's arrival amongst us. And as we are blessed and sent out into the mystery held within the deep darkness of this night, who knows what wondrous transformations have been silently birthed in our midst, to appear in the fullness of God's time, in the clear light of day, before our wondering eyes?

+CHRISTOPHER