

Sermon Christmas Midnight Mass 2020

2020 will undoubtedly be a year most of us will be happy to have behind us. As we come to this celebration tonight, we give thanks to God that we can indeed be here and celebrate and share in the festivities of our Lord's saving birth. We give thanks mindful that in many parts of the world and amongst many communities the Christmas celebrations will not be possible. Even in Bethlehem, the usual throngs of pilgrims will be absent. Many of the usual festivities have been cancelled. For many, Christmas this year will be very different to the one they would have hoped for.

As we stand at the threshold of a new year, we will, hopefully, take occasion to pause and reflect on the year that has been. It will be good to ask, how has this year been for you, for us? Amongst the challenges, what have been the blessings? What have we learnt? About ourselves, each other, our community? What are those things we have been forced to put aside, perhaps for good, and which we will not miss? What positive things - and for those who have eyes to see, there *have been* positive things from this past year – do we want to take with us as we step ahead?

2020 has certainly brought to many of us new experiences, new opportunities and indeed a new language. And all this unprecedented, of course! This time a year ago who would have known about ZOOM, or indeed of ZOOM fatigue?! We could not have imagined then of a need to livestream church services; of almost the entire workforce of this city working remotely; of lockdown, of curfew, of school closures, of restrictions in movement, of work permits, of roadblocks, of face masks. Yes, what a strange time we have had of it!

But perhaps what will be the enduring memory of this year was the experience of social distancing and social isolation. This is perhaps what has made for the heaviest toll. Families and loved ones unable to see each other for months. Most of us unable to see or mingle with anyone outside our own households. And all of us, even now, having to negotiate that tricky space of how we physically greet each other. For nearly ten months now we have been told to keep our distance and to sanitise and wash our hands. We have been advised to not shake hands, to not hug. We all understand the reasons why. But deprived of this aspect of human existence for many was the greatest burden of this time; for so long unable to experience simple human touch. For so long, many of us deprived of the warmth and comfort of human embrace.

The great mystery we celebrate tonight of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, we can rightly see as *God's embrace* of humankind. The birth of Jesus is God's embrace of us! Such is the love of God, such is God's desire to share life with us, such is God's hope that we might say 'yes' to him, that he comes to us as close as he possibly could! God in Christ seeks to come so close to us, to embrace us, *to hug us* so tightly, that he chooses to come as one of us. So strong is God's love for us that his embrace of us is one he can never let go.

In the story told us tonight from Luke's gospel of the birth of the Lord Christ we hear how the new-born child was wrapped in swaddling clothes. When the angels visit the shepherds to tell them of the miraculous birth, they are told that the sign of their hoped-for joy, *the sign* of the birth of the promised saviour, is the child wrapped in swaddling clothes. Perhaps this can be the sign for us! Can there be no greater symbol of the mystery we celebrate this night than of the child so tightly wrapped in swaddling clothes?! *We* can find the sign we need of the God wrapped so closely about us, of the God who reaches out to embrace us, lying there in the manger.

The God who comes so close to us, embraces us so to share our very life is further signified by the manger. Now, in our popular imagination this often leads to think of a stable setting. Now it is very difficult to read the story in its own cultural terms. We constantly impose our own assumptions about our life onto it. The manger as the feeding trough of animals would have us think - especially in our urban context - that it would be kept away from the home, away from the family of course!

But even to the present day, many of the homes from land of Jesus' birth are a single-room house, with a lower compartment for animals to be brought in at night, and either a room at the back for visitors, or space on the roof. The family living area would usually have hollows in the ground, filled with hay, where the animals would feed. So, most likely, then, Joseph and Mary, would have travelled to Bethlehem to relations of Joseph, and found the family guest room already full, probably with other relatives who arrived earlier. What we translate as 'inn' simply means 'place to stay'. So, Joseph and Mary would have stayed with the family itself, in the main room of the house, and there Mary gave birth. The most natural place to lay the baby was in the hay-filled depressions at the lower end of the house where the animals were fed. So, Jesus was born *in the midst of the family*, and all the visiting relations, right in the thick of it. Not in the shed out back, but *right in the heart of the home*.

The message of the incarnation is that Jesus is one of us. He came to be what we are. He was born in an ordinary house of some common peasant and was simply laid in one of the mangers, such as are still found in the homes of farmers in this region. God's embrace of humankind means he is born in a normal, crowded, warm, welcoming home. God's embrace of our life brings him into the very heart of our homes.

It is most appropriate, then, that the form of our celebration tonight of this great mystery is the Eucharist. This is, indeed, *Christ's mass*. It is the mass which most perfectly expresses the wonder of God's embrace of humankind. It is the mass which so perfectly reminds us of the God who comes to share our life in its fullness. It is the mass in which the Lord Christ comes to us again, visits us again, even into the poor homes of our hearts. The Incarnation is God's tight embrace of humankind. And in the Eucharist, Christ comes into our very selves! *There is no closer than he can get!* This is how close – how intimate – God desires to be to us: for us to take him into *our very being*, for us to feel and know his presence within us!

So often we think that making sense of God and the mystery of life, the mystery of faith and believing, the struggle to find meaning and our place in the universe is dependent on our efforts, dependent on our straining after the big ideas, that we cannot progress without our hard work. But the wonder of the Christmas story is that God himself takes that burden from us. Is not about our efforts and our hard work. God himself reaches out and shows us the way. God himself shows us the answers to our questioning. He comes to us exactly where we are, even into our homes, even into our very ordinariness. That is God's embrace of us!

If Jesus comes to us, rather than us coming to him, if he visits us in our very homes and comes as a surprising, disruptive, but ultimately welcome presence, one who will turn our world upside-down and change it forever, then that makes all the difference. God's embrace of us means that we can dispel once and for all the lingering shadows of loneliness and fear. That baby in the manger tells us, we are not alone! God's embrace of us means that none of us, despite the challenges of this year, need experience isolation or be kept distant. The birth of the little child which we celebrate tonight tells us of God who comes into the heart of our homes. A God who continues to come close to us in the lowly form of bread. A God who wants you to feel and know his presence. This Christmas allow yourselves to feel God's tight embrace of you. This Christmas, know the God who comes down to sweep us into his arms. Amen.