

Sermon Midnight Mass 2021

I have no doubt that most, if not all of you, will be sitting down to some sort of special meal sometime tomorrow. And, without doubt, for most of you, a fair amount of planning and preparation has gone into that meal, as it rightly should. Mostly we have a clear idea about what is needed and what is expected. Sometimes this depends on a whole host of unspoken and unwritten expectations. In some settings and contexts this will be very carefully determined by culture or ethnicity. For others, how Christmas lunch unfolds will be quite specific to a particular family or household, which, more often than not, is the case in this country. We shape our own customs and traditions. But whether formal or informal, innovative or bound by tradition, everyone has to play their part. All the pieces need to be put together so that the whole meal will 'work'. Someone needs to buy the food and cook it. Someone needs to bring the pavlova and another the salads. Someone needs to make sure the presents are bought and wrapped. Someone needs to make sure the tablecloth is ironed, and the front lawn tidied. Someone needs to make sure the oven works, and the prawns are put in the fridge. Someone needs to make the gravy for the roast and another the custard for Christmas pudding. And hopefully all this doesn't just fall on one person.... And when the pieces *do* come together, well then, that can make for a truly memorable and enjoyable occasion for all!

By the same measure, our celebration tonight. Let me assure you, a great deal of preparation has gone into this mass celebrating our Lord's saving birth! The church has been cleaned, the brass polished, the flowers arranged, the service booklets printed, the music rehearsed, the servers received their instructions, a sermon written. No one assisting in the worship tonight has rocked up two minutes before start time. If we all had done that, well, our experience tonight would be a shy less than catastrophic. Memorable perhaps. Enjoyable? Far less so. In an inexplicable and hard-to-describe way, something holds it all together. Perhaps tradition, perhaps unspoken expectations, perhaps a desire to make this celebration a highlight of our year. Perhaps a sense that this is important and that it is *worthy* of our effort is what holds our celebration together. Allow that spirit to infuse our celebration - including your Christmas gatherings tomorrow - then the different parts work together as a whole. But if any of us approached what we are doing tonight or your lunch tomorrow casually or indifferently, well, then, they would simply all fall apart.

The wonderful story we recall tonight, again, has several key parts. There are different characters and components which *combined* create the greatest story ever told! What part of the story, which character could we do without? It's a hypothetical question, and one which cannot be answered. Because all the players, and all the pieces *belong together*. Mary, Joseph, the angels, the Shepherds, the Wise Men, the star, all immovable fixtures in this story. But the question we asked of our worship tonight, and the question we asked of our cultural and familial Christmas celebrations, we would do well to ask here as well: *what exactly holds it together?* What is the glue that makes the story, the whole scene, fit together? What is it, that if we removed it, would make it all fall apart and in fact be quite meaningless, even a silly parody?

Look at the story we know so well, look at the incidents as described in the gospel accounts, notice the details the evangelists choose to tell us, then the answer is quite unavoidable. What holds the Christmas story all together is nothing less than the action and presence of God. Remove, what we might call, the 'God factor', and the whole thing falls apart! Now, to be sure, there have been plenty of attempts over the last few centuries to do just this, to remove the 'God factor' from the Christmas story. There has been no shortage of attempts to explain away the supposedly embarrassing fact of the miraculous and the supernatural in the record of scripture and as the basis of our faith. But to insist on this really just leaves us at best with a faint imitation, and at worst a hollow delusion. The whole story becomes a mockery. If you doubt this, remind yourself of so much of what 'passes' for Christmas all about us...

So, it is important to reclaim *God* as the central actor in this greatest story ever told! Elizabeth in her old age, miraculously conceiving so to bear John the Baptist, to be the forerunner of the promised Messiah; the angelic vision to Mary and the shepherds; the divine messages through a sequence of dreams to both Joseph and the Magi; the miraculous star which leads the wise men; and most essentially, Gabriel, 'sent by God' telling Mary, *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.* There it is. Remove that, and there is nothing at all. *The entirety* of the Christmas story pivots around God's action, God's initiative, God's self-disclosure, God's self-revelation, God communicating to humankind. And all these messages, these dreams, these revelations and divine interventions, all narrowing in, all focusing on the one who would be named 'Jesus'.

This past week well known Australian broadcaster and social commentator Stan Grant wrote a short article reflecting how the Christmases of his aboriginal childhood were now lost, a thing of the past. He also noted how the Aboriginal civil rights movement had grown out of the church. Men and women of profound faith who demanded Australia recognise their God-given equality. He went on to say how he was dismayed at what he saw 'as a rising pessimism among a new generation of Indigenous people. Amongst some there is an abandonment of hope.' This lack of hope, Grant identifies, as resulting directly from a loss of faith. What he sees at work within his own community can of course be extended to western culture as a whole. What we now face is but part of the centuries-long trajectory of the rise of secularism and the erosion of faith. And what are we left with? Well, Grant bravely suggests, '*a society obsessed with cartoonish cancel culture, debilitating contests for recognition and poisonous identity wars. All of it like a cancer eating democracy itself. There is little transcendence, just inherent pessimism and hopelessness...A cynicism...has pervaded society and has fractured bonds of tradition and family and community and faith.*' My brothers and sisters, the evidence is all about us. Remove God from the scene, remove any sense of the transcendent, and in effect we remove any true and lasting hope.

At the start of our liturgy tonight, a likeness of the Christ child was carried solemnly in procession through the church. And this simple gesture reminds of us a profound spiritual truth. The Christ Child has come to dwell among us. God has visited his people. He has walked among us. He is *Emmanuel*, God-with-us. And then, the image of Christ placed in the manger, as the story so well-known and well-loved tells us. In our stable scene here, Christ is placed in the very centre – rightly in the very centre. Now, without doubt the birth of Christ in Bethlehem two millennia ago would not have been as neat and tidy, as symmetrical and serene, as we have presented for us in our depiction of the stable scene here. But the essential sentiment is correct. He is the centre of it all! He is centre of gravity and of history. Rightly do all eyes are turn to him! What is asked of faithful Christians is the courage of our convictions, that there be some intellectual honesty, not only about the Christmas story, but entirety of our faith. Remove the miraculous and the supernatural, and faith in divine revelation, well then there is nothing. But for people of faith, it is everything. Restore Christ to the centre and he will be the glue that makes everything stick. Allow the story to be told in its own terms and we will discover the One whose hope does not disappoint. Amen.