

Sermon Midnight Mass 2022

As we come to this celebration tonight, we also come to the end of the year. The end of a year is, of course, a good time to pause and reflect, to look back on the year past, and to recall what was important and memorable. Sometimes we cannot wait to put a year behind us. 2020 and 2021 I suggest were probably such years for most of us. Perhaps for this year, as we stagger to the finish line, we might sigh a sigh of relief that we escaped further lockdowns, that restrictions were minimal, and that - however tenuous and uncertain - a semblance of 'normality' returned.

For many of us as we look back on this past year, what was particularly notable was the passing of her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second. Our memory of her in many ways was coloured by how we started the year, with her Platinum Jubilee in February, 70 years as monarch. Reflection on both her Jubilee and her death highlighted for many not only her service and devotion to duty but also her personal and lively faith.

Not a few of us here today, year by year, every Christmas day - once our Christmas lunches were eaten, the dishes done and put away, a game of backyard cricket and maybe even a nap on the couch - would then tune into the Queen's Christmas message. A tradition, of course, started by her father, one she continued through her long reign, and one to be continued by her son as we shall see tomorrow. Without exception - and indeed becoming more explicit in later life - these addresses of Her Late Majesty reflected her sincere faith. They were not just vague messages of peace and goodwill but considered reflections that centred on the person and witness of Jesus Christ.

In an age when so many feel so terrified and nervous to express our faith confidently and publicly, this might yet remain for us a powerful example. When we feel we cannot 'force' religion onto our neighbours, work colleagues or even our own children, her Late Majesty - perhaps as a final testament - might encourage us to get over such nervousness. Maybe her final message to people of sincere Christian faith is: stop being a coward and stand up for what you believe in!

(I like to imagine the trendy lefties who run the western media shifting nervously in their places and quietly rolling their eyes in disgust at the Queen's public display of faith. We might further imagine some of them trying to encourage Queen Elizabeth to 'tone it down a bit' and she just ignoring them, as we must...)

When Queen Elizabeth delivered her Christmas broadcast in 1975, she reminded viewers, *'We are celebrating a birthday – the birthday of a Child born nearly 2000 years ago... His simple message of love has been turning the world upside down ever since.'* The Queen then urged everyone to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and love their neighbours. It was a reminder that our actions can change lives, and that we can, if we so choose, make the world a better place. She went on, *'If you throw a stone into a pool, the ripples go on spreading outwards. A big stone can cause waves, but even the smallest pebble changes the whole pattern of the water. Our daily actions are like those ripples; each one makes a difference, even the smallest.'*

That we are gathered here tonight, when so many others are either sleeping or partying; that we are gathered here tonight in this strangely built place, engaged in strange rituals, performed by people in strange clothes accompanied by strange music; that we are gathered here tonight to remember something that happened in an obscure place amongst an obscure people, reveals precisely the force, the impact, the power of one stone on a pool of water. Our gathering here tonight is the ripple of its impact. We are riding the crest of its wave. The birth of Jesus Christ ripples out from one small corner of the Roman Empire, from a small town, from a stable, from a manger to us. Hundreds and now thousands of years after that moment, we gather as witness to this event. The birth of this child continuing to send out ripples across space and time.

But unlike the ripples caused by a stone in water, the ripples caused by Christ's birth do not grow weaker the further we go from the source. For a stone in water the biggest ripples are those closest to the point of impact but grow smaller, weaker and fainter the further out and the closer to shore they come. But not for Christ. More people and more nations feel the impact of his intrusion into our world than ever before. The decline of faith in the West is only a small part of the story. The bigger story is that the ripples just keep moving and out and out and out. More and more people continue to feel the impact of his birth.

As we hear once more the Christmas stories we see again and again, this principle at work: how the birth of Christ sends waves of disturbance into the lives of those involved. *All* the key characters we encounter in the infancy narratives of Christ show how the birth of this child unnerves them, disturbs them, unsettles and disrupts them.

We think of Mary, thrust out of obscurity, invited by the angelic messenger to bear the Son of God. Her assent bringing upon her the risk of shame, and worse: danger even to her own life. The sword of Simeon's prophecy *will* come to pierce her own soul also. Yet through all the key moments of her son's life she will be there. Her life centres around her Son. Her life only in reference to him.

We think of Joseph, the simple good man, seeking to make sense of the mystery unfolding before him. Called then to be protector, and helper, to love and care for the boy that is not his own. His life centreing now on this boy. His life in reference to him.

We think of the shepherds. They are on the edge of the city. They are not at the centre of things. And they too are disturbed from their usual business. But it is not enough just to hear a message, even an angelic message. Even though they receive it at night, they must *respond*. They must *go and see* and then tell others about the wonder they have experienced. The child disturbs. His birth leaves an impact.

And we think too of those mysterious wise men. The ripples widening to lands in the East. And yet they too, feel the impact. An impact that sees them leave home and safety, to travel to unknown places. From a woman, to a home and family, to the edge of a city, to the edge of an empire... The ripples of this birth going out and out.

We enact this truth visually, ritually, in our celebration tonight. At the start of our service tonight we processed – circled - around this church with an image of the Christ Child. And then we placed it in the manger, the centre of our devotions tonight. The little child dropped like a pebble in a pond. And we see – visually - how the ripples have worked their way out. We see how inextricably he pulls all toward himself. We gather around him. Circle about him. Surely, the Christian faith is only this: Christ is the Centre. Our lives only make sense in reference to him.

But all this leaves us with a question. Will we allow him to disturb us? Will the impact of his birth be the centre of gravity, if you like, for us? Will we permit him to be the focus, the point of reference for us? Will we allow him to shape the pattern of the ripples we might hope to send out?

We can stand on the shore and look out from a distance, far from the impact, far from the ripples. But Christmas is an invitation to get in close, close like the God who comes so close as to become one of us. Indeed, Christmas is an invitation to jump into the deep and to ride the waves caused by the birth of this child. Amen.