

## Christmas Midnight Mass 2024

Christians are a crazy bunch of people. You're a crazy bunch of people! For most of us, tomorrow will be a pretty packed day. Most of us will be caught up in a whirl of activity. We'll spend at least part of the day with friends and family and loved ones, (and even the day with ones we don't love!). Some of us will be crazy enough to be back here tomorrow morning for more church... And yet in a crazy sort of way we're here, in the middle of the night! And that when most other people are either in bed, or making their way to bed, or partying hard in bars and restaurants and nightclubs.

We're a crazy bunch of people doing crazy (or at least strange) sorts of things. What we are doing here tonight is all pretty weird. We are here in middle of the night, surrounded by candlelight. We use strange symbols and engage in strange ritual actions. We sing carols and other music. And this in a culture which has almost entirely forgotten how to sing, communally at least. For those of us who know the church well, who love this feast and what we are doing tonight - who love the church and its celebrations, its rituals and customs - all this is familiar and beautiful. But now for most people all this is increasingly remote and strange. It can appear impenetrable to the person off street, to those staggering home after a drink too many down Chapel St.

We are a crazy, strange people, with strange crazy customs. And we have some crazy, strange ideas as well. But that is precisely *why* we are here tonight. We are here because of some strange ideas, crazy ideas! But ideas so compelling, ideas so captivating, that we can't but help respond in strange, crazy ways. And the strange crazy idea that compels us be here tonight? That God is made man. That 2000 years ago is born in human flesh the Creator of the Universe. For the ancients God was utterly transcendent, Other, remote. But in Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem, a new, strange, crazy idea: that God is close to us, God has come near to us. That God becomes one of us. And this not an end in itself. But, as Saint Athanasius way back in the fourth century realised, *He became what we are that we might become what he is.*

Not only is this a crazy, strange idea, it is a wondrous idea! And an idea that changes everything. For this reason, we cloak our celebration tonight with layer upon layer of strangeness: candlelight, incense, movement, music, the church dressed it's best, the best music, the best decorations. All to reinforce, to highlight, to emphasise that what we celebrate tonight is not just something strange, but something that changes everything. *He became what we are that we might become what he is.*

Now, these are not just pleasant, pious thoughts. We do not just assert this belief as some sort of theological nicety. This assertion about who Jesus is, who the babe of Bethlehem is, has radical and serious impact. It changes everything. It changes our relationship with God. It changes our relationship with each other. It changes our relationship with the world about us. Everything changes – everything hinges – on how we understand *this* child.

The radical implications of asserting that the babe of Bethlehem is none other than God Incarnate, God made man, fully divine and fully human, is already hinted at in the familiar and beautiful gospel reading we have heard tonight. The angel visits the shepherds, and says to them, *Do not be afraid. Listen I bring you good news of great joy....Today... a saviour has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord...* And then, as we have heard - and the inspiration of so many Christmas cards and carols - *a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to men whom he favours.*

The good news that brings great joy is that the long-promised, long hoped Messiah – the Christ – is born. And that his birth will inaugurate God's peace. *Peace to men who enjoy his favour. Peace.* Is it not the desire for peace that lay in the depths of every human heart? In the well-known line from tonight's gospel, we are told Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. The whole world. The emperor seeking to bring order, stability, control over his empire. This is a symbol of a contrived peace. An artificial peace. But is it not the lesson from history, repeated again and again and again, and repeated even in our own day? That these worldly - these top down - decrees for order, stability and control soon ring hollow, soon become the opposite, the inverse, of what they promise.

This past year are we not reminded (perhaps more than most other years) how elusive peace truly is? But the peace the angels announce is not simply the end of violence and armed hostility, though that certainly is brought within the scope of this good news. But peace which calms out personal anxieties. Peace which can speak to the inner turmoils of our hearts, the self-doubts, the feelings of unworthiness. Peace which reconciles the inner conflicts at work in each of us. Peace, which heals broken relationships. Peace which breaks down the walls of mistrust and suspicion. Peace which deals the guilts of our past.

This is what the angels are announcing! All those things that seek to tear us apart – within and about us – are dealt with! God has stepped in. He has acted decisively to heal and redeem. Jesus' own name revealing his sacred mission: *God saves*. In the classic Christian understanding, Jesus is the one who saves us from our sins. And sin precisely that which dispels peace from our hearts and lives.

But oftentimes the greatest conflict we can have - the greatest disruption to our peace - is the battle we can have with God. But this is only possible if we have the wrong idea about God, if we take our sights off the sublime mystery we celebrate tonight. This conflict chiefly arises when we position God as the Supreme Being. Perhaps innocent sounding enough. But if God is simply the Supreme Being then he is just like other beings, indeed a being like us, just the highest, the top and the best. But if just a being like us, then we will jostle with him, we will fight him for superiority. But pushed to its extreme, this jostling for superiority gives rise to abandonment of the idea of God. He is rejected altogether, as in the atheist cause. 'I don't need to jostle for supremacy. I don't not need to jostle with God. I am God!' Because that is the ultimate result of the atheistic rejection of God. The self becomes the highest and only authority.

But a key title the gospels ascribe to Jesus helps push back against these fatal misunderstandings. And that is the title *Emmanuel* - God with us. Because God in Christ is with us, we can assert that God is for us. God is not in competition with us. He is *for* us. He only *enhances* us. He only raises us up. He becomes one of us so that we might become like Him. He only wishes our peace. God is on the side of humankind. And this idea is preserved in the traditional formulation of who Jesus is: fully divine and fully human. He is God and Man. This is how the disorders of the human heart are dealt with. Because he unites - perfectly - in his own person seeming opposites. This is how he brings peace. Because he is with us, he is for us. He is among us. And this surely is the strangest idea, the weirdest idea. And one that changes everything.

If I could sponsor a T-shirt that everyone could take home as a Christmas present tonight, it would be emblazoned with the slogan: *Make Christianity Weird Again*. But maybe you don't need a tacky T-shirt to remember this. You have a sense of this already. Because you *are* here tonight. Tonight, in weird customs cloaking weird ideas, we celebrate the weirdest idea of all: that in the babe of Bethlehem God becomes man, so that we might know – now and forever – his peace. Amen.