

## Sermon Midnight Mass 2017

A very warm welcome to all of you here tonight. Christmas is a wonderful thing. People are usually more happy and relaxed. If we're lucky we can step away from the usual pressures and freneticism that is characteristic of most of our lives most of the time and enjoy a bit of a break. At the same time, many people experience the pressure of contriving the 'perfect Christmas'. This idea has a powerful pull on people. Advertisers of course have a field day selling us the idea: the perfect Christmas decorations; the perfect lunch; the perfect gift; the perfect table décor; the perfect dinner companions; the perfect holiday... But it must be the great tragedy of our celebrations of Christmas that so many people feel so stressed and pressured and inadequate and hassled at this time. In no small part because of the pressure for everything to be perfect!

The trouble is of course that nothing in life is perfect. There are always rough edges we have to put up with. There will always be someone or something to de-rail our good plans. Something will get overcooked. There will be gifts we don't really don't like. There will be someone that really gets on our nerves. But that's ok. It's good to be grateful for even over cooked food, remembering so many in our world who are hungry. It's good to be gracious with gifts we neither like nor need because someone has actually gone to some effort to give you that gift. It is important we are gracious with that difficult, irritating, embarrassing relative because we can't just put up with people we like. It's good to remember life cannot be lived to the full if we try to sanitise every experience and every human encounter. We need to be sure we make room for and allow for the awkward, the uncomfortable, and even the unlikeable. Even at Christmas. And maybe especially at Christmas.

Indeed, this is part of what we celebrate at Christmas. The story that we have heard read in the Gospel tonight wants us to see how the very ordinary - the very *imperfect* - can be used by God. Part of the trouble, though, is that we have allowed even the story at the heart of our Christmas celebration to also become so terribly sanitised, to become so terribly tame, so that all the rough edges are taken off. The figures that we encounter in the traditional Christmas story can appear terribly remote, and unreal, so very polished and insipid and sweet. We have a beautiful crib here, but the figures can seem locked in an idealized moment of serenity and calm. But if we allow the story to speak for itself, we see that it resists our efforts to tame and domesticate it. Now, I've never had the joy of being a father, but I do know that child-birth can be a pretty noisy, messy, painful business. We need to bring that to our hearing of the story. We need to be mindful of the scandal, the gossip and danger that surrounded Mary's pregnancy. We need to remember the discomfort, the awkwardness, the inelegance of the setting with in the holy birth takes place. It's far from perfect on many levels!

And the shepherds who receive first the angelic message of the birth of the Saviour, Christ the Lord, are also far from perfect. It's good to note that it is not the Bethlehem Business Council that gets the news first. It's not the Judean 'in crowd' who are disturbed from their preoccupations to adore the Christ child. It's not the beautiful young things you receive the privilege. It is

not the respectable down-town, middle class families who are woken up with the Good News. But a bunch of unlikely, imperfect, smelly shepherds.

That this *is* a strange and peculiar thing that *these* should be granted this distinct honour, we should keep in mind that Shepherds were considered unreliable. They were not allowed to give testimony in law courts. They were regarded with suspicion by most people because they had a reputation of being, shall we say, rather light-fingered. They were considered as nothing more than vagabonds and thieves. So, what we are told here is something of great importance to the gospel writer: of God's preference to deal with those on the margins. Literally, the shepherds were those on the margins. Their work meant they could not live in towns. They were always on the edge, always outsiders. But this is the good news!! If such outsiders - such despised, imperfect creatures as a bunch of shepherds - were the first witnesses to God's saving plan in Christ then perhaps there is a place for an imperfect bunch like us... If the shepherds were invited, perhaps we are too. If *they* share in this incredible event - that signals the definitive dealing between God and human kind - perhaps we can too. If they can allow their hearts to be moved to action and adoration, perhaps ours can be as well.

If they allow their lives to be interrupted by the marvel, surely we can allow for that possibility for us as well. If these lowly, despised, contemptible shepherds can be the recipients of God's good new, perhaps we can be also.

So often we feel we have to be good to approach God. So often we feel there are certain hoops we have to jump through to be a person of faith. So often we feel we have to stay away, that we can't get too close because we feel we are inadequate or unworthy; that somehow this religion stuff is for other, perfect people, but not for me.... But faith is not for good or perfect people. If we were good we would have no need of the gift of God's son. Sharing in the life of God is not for the perfect! That's the whole point! It's because we are - all of us - broken, wounded, hurting, imperfect - that God chooses to share this broken, wounded hurting, imperfect life. Because none of us can get it together, God comes to us in Jesus, through all the mess of life, to offer us a way forward. And not just for some special 'others', but for all us.

At Christmas we celebrate the God who draws near to us so that we might draw near to God. The shepherds challenge those of us who normally keep a safe distance from God, who try to leave faith to others and the practice of religion for special occasions or when need arises. The shepherds challenge those of us who feel unworthy, who feel outsiders, who feel there is no place for them in the life of faith that in fact their place could be *right in the centre of it*. Perhaps this Christmas we can question those little excuses we often make for ourselves about keeping away or keeping distant. The shepherds show us that if *they* are invited, we are *all* invited! And it is the challenge of those who have already found a place in the life of faith to make room, to accommodate, those who do come seeking the Christ. My friends, God's not looking for a perfect Christmas. So perhaps we can all relax about not being perfect. At Christmas God shows us that this mess, this complex human life, is good enough for him to share in. At Christmas we see that the invitation has gone out to us all to share in the life he offers. Like the shepherds, let us dare to accept the invitation. Amen.