

**Mass during the Night on Christmas Day**  
*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary Magdalene,*  
*Hewelsfield, 2022.*

*Isaiah 9:2-7*  
*Luke 2:1-14*  
*John 1:1-14*

Lord Jesus, Light of the World, born in David's city of Bethlehem, born like him to be a king, be born in our hearts this Christmastide, be King of our lives today. Amen.

Over the past 20 or so years I have celebrated Christmas in all sorts of places, including suburban south London, Cambridge, Gloucester city, and in the glorious cathedral at Salisbury. But it is actually always to these rural parishes that my heart and mind return when I think about midnight mass. My image of midnight mass is fixed in Tidenham really, coming out of a little rural church where you actually can hear the cattle lowing if you're lucky. So it's a joy to be invited to preach here tonight.

Now of course we have rather constructed this Christmas card image, and if we compare it to the likely reality of occupied Bethlehem in the historical period at the beginning of the New Testament, is not likely to have looked or felt much like tonight. But of course we don't gather here tonight to try to do a historical re-enactment of something that happened two thousand or so years ago in history. And in fact on the surface of it, it is utterly preposterous that we have gathered here at all. Why on earth are you here? Why aren't you at home in the warm, tucked up in bed, or in front of the television with a sherry or something?

Well, because we gather here not to re-enact, but to *remember* (in the Christian sense), and to place ourselves into, through prayer and worship, one of the most profound moments in the history of the world. The moment when God became one with us. The incarnation. The moment, as the theologians put it, where heaven stoops down to earth, and earth is lifted up to heaven. The moment where the relationship between God and creation is completely and irrevocably changed. God is here. God is with us. God becomes fully human, at the same time as remaining fully divine. Which means we have the potential to become fully divine as well.

What an extraordinary thought. We can become divine. It is what the eastern theologians call 'divinization'. The thinkers of the West tend to use the phrase 'sanctification'.

What is this gift of Christmas? Well this year I have found two poems really helpful. [*And I have provided them for you on the other sheet, so you can take them home and read them at your leisure. Or make paper aeroplanes if you find this sermon too boring*] The first of which is Thomas Hardy's wonderful poem, *The Oxen*. It's a poem that picks up on that lovely folk tradition that at midnight on Christmas Eve all the animals in the world kneel down, recognising their maker come among them.

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.  
"Now they are all on their knees,"  
an elder said as we sat in a flock  
by the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where  
they dwelt in their strawy pen,  
nor did it occur to one of us there  
to doubt they were kneeling then.

Thomas Hardy gives us this image of creation recognising its maker, reacting instinctively to the fact that God is among us. The cattle in the farms around us this very night kneeling down, somehow knowing that it was amongst their ancestors that God came into the world on that first Christmas night.

In contrast Malcolm Guite wrote the sonnet, *Refugee*, to try to shake us out of our temptation to leave the baby there in the crib. It isn't enough, he says, to just stay here. Though here is lovely and magical, and is a good place to start. But we need to remember why God bothered with Christmas. Why the baby was born. And of course what happened very soon indeed after that birth in Bethlehem, when Mary and Joseph and the child are made refugees themselves, displaced from their home by an angry king seeking his life.

“We think of him as safe beneath the steeple, or cosy in a crib beside the font, but he is with a million displaced people on the long road of weariness and want. For even as we sing our final carol his family is up and on that road, fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel, glancing behind, and shouldering the load.”

It is the case that God has come down. And I love the image from Hardy that this is so obvious that most of creation can recognise it instinctively. But poor, broken, battered humanity doesn't. And so we are a world of Herods, struggling and raging from our dark towers, generating fractured societies, 'special military operations', families of terrified people packed into flimsy rubber boats.

And the temptation is to think that what we have to do is make God notice. But Christmas night is the promise that God already noticed. 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great

light.' On a dark hillside, unsuspecting shepherds witness the tearing of the barrier between heaven and earth. And as we will hear at the very end of the service, 'the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never overcome it.'

God is already here. God is here in St Briavels/Hewelsfield, and in Ukraine, and on the dinghy in the middle of the English Channel. And in your heart. The miracle of Christmas has happened. There is no barrier between heaven and earth. There are angels everywhere. As Austin Farrar said, "Mary holds her finger out, and a divine hand closes on it."

But, as I have said often in the past, the work of Christmas, for the church, for the world, is to make the decision to listen for the rustle of Angel's wings. To join in. To be the people who, having received Christ here tonight, carry that truth, that love, that joy with us into tomorrow. To be people who will stand against the darkness. And do so, as God does: gently. Lovingly. Never doing this through power, like Herod. Quietly, insistently, we must stand against the darkness, so that grace finds a way. Light creeps in around the edges. And, again, in the words of Farrar, "we do not lift our hands to pull the love of God down to us, but he lifts his hand to pull human compassion down upon his cradle."

And that is why we meet here in the night. That is why what we do here is not preposterous, or a sign that we have gone slightly batty. We come here in the dark, we reach out our hands, and our hands become the manger. And God comes down. The Word becomes flesh. The bread becomes God. And we offer him a manger, a cradle. And then we go out again, into the darkness, to kneel with the oxen, because we have seen our Lord. Amen.