



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

The First Eucharist of Christmas Midnight Mass

readings: [Isaiah 52.7-10](#), [John 1.1-14](#).

24 December 2022

I wonder what your favourite carol might be? Two years ago, a poll revealed Silent Night as the nation's favourite. A year ago, Silent Night was topped by O Holy Night, and relegated to number two, closely followed by in the Bleak Mid-winter and then by Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

You can tell me your favourite on the way out and I am sorry if it hasn't made the cut for our carols at this Midnight Mass.

My favourite carol only made it to number 20 last year, but nevertheless its at the heart of our service tonight. We just sung, 'It Came upon the Midnight Clear' and you might think it's an unusual favourite choice because it doesn't explicitly mention the birth of Jesus. It was written by a Unitarian minister in the USA in the middle of the nineteenth century a few years before the outbreak of the American Civil War. The contrast between the peace proclaimed by the angels in the open skies and the wars and oppression that control life on earth conveys the longing for peace and the fears of violence to come.

The carol speaks powerfully in describing the big picture. It puts our celebrations this night into perspective. The heavens open and suddenly God is speaking directly to humanity. It's a weary world, its landscapes are sad, humanity is weary, and sin and strife has reigned for far too long. Many years before, in Judeo-Christian legend, its said that Adam and Eve walking in the Garden of Eden could hear the angels' song in heaven. As they walked away from paradise in shame after their disobedience, so the sound of angels singing faded away, replaced by the confused babble of the sounds of humanity at war with itself.

On Christmas night the new age begins and humanity's relationship with God is restored. The returning sound of the angels singing is a cosmic event as the new age of salvation is proclaimed throughout the universe. This is the age of gold breaking through in angelic song. It's an era of peace, and of justice, of righteousness and love. An age of all that is good and wholesome, an age that is irreversible and for ever, an age of past wrongs put right, of disobedience turned to obedience.

Tonight, in the town of Bethlehem there is the first of no less than three Christmas celebrations. The festivities today are repeated twice more in January with different Eastern Orthodox traditions. But as the Christian community gathers with many pilgrims in their midst Bethlehem highlights this world's brokenness. Bethlehem today is a town that is sealed off from nearby Jerusalem by an eight- to nine-metre-high concrete wall separating the West Bank from Israel. For Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem, it's the experience of occupation and oppression that will be uppermost in their hearts and minds this Christmas, unable as they are to travel to nearby Jerusalem as part of their celebrations. Just down the road the population of the Aida refugee camp stands as a reminder of a decades old conflict that remains unresolved.

The wall is a symbol of all that separates human beings from each other tonight. Our hearts are with the people of Ukraine defending themselves against the Russian invasion nearing its first anniversary, and we pray yet again for the Ukrainian community, and the many refugees, here in Derby and Derbyshire. In Paris there is bewilderment at the inhumanity of what appears to be a racially motivated murder of three people at the Kurdish cultural centre.

Here in Britain, we are in the midst of strike levels we have not seen for decades, foodbanks are scandalously busy supporting those who are hungry including those in work, and many are deeply worried about the impact of the emerging cost of living crisis and fuel bills that will be unmeetable for so many.

Tonight, the skies open once again, and the song of the angels is heard across the world. Even amid war and economic crisis we find hope in the God who became a human being; the one who is the Prince of Peace; the one who invites all humanity to a new way of being and living and gives us the power to make this a reality.

This is because in the birth of Jesus God transforms human nature and reverses the effects of our disobedience. God turns the world upside down. God works in the least expected of ways. God empties himself of all but love and is born in a place that was as oppressed by occupying forces in the first century as it is today.

This night it will be shepherds who find their way to the cradle amongst the cattle. They are the first to receive the good news. They are the first to worship. They are the first to spread the good news of God's salvation.

'All who heard what they said were amazed at what the shepherds told them', says St Luke. The shepherds become 'angels'. The Greek word for angel means messenger and this is what the shepherds become, 'angels to the peoples of the world'. Conversation but conversation, step by step, encounter by encounter, story by story, they spread the gospel message of God in the manger that was the beginning of the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

But we need to go deeper than this. The shepherds are so caught up in the message they received and passed on that they become the message itself.

And this is because the shepherds were on the outside. They were cut off from Jerusalem, not by a physical wall but by the barrier of religious observance, unable to access the Temple because, living in fields with their flocks, they were not able to keep the right laws. They were uneducated and because of their lifestyle and personal habits were stigmatized by the political and social mainstream.

In Christmas God proclaims salvation as the great reversal, a moment of turning the world upside down, or it's better to put it - the right side up. The despised and rejected move to 'stage-centre'. The weakness of a newly-born infant becomes the power to save humanity from its self-hatred and self-absorption, from its wickedness and violence.

The vulnerability of Mary and Joseph becomes the faithfulness that bring God's son Jesus to mature humanity and to his death on a cross at the hand of wickedness. Jesus' death speaks even more clearly of God's great reversal for creation in need of redemption. Crucified the other side of the capital city wall, love defeats death in resurrection and the poor, the marginalised, the weak and vulnerable, the humble and the meek move into the centre of God's purposes, gathered as the new people of the age of gold, all the while growing within humanity the kingdom of heaven.

Nobody expresses the arrival of a new age in the infant Jesus better than the English poet U A Fanthorpe who was a Quaker and who died in 2009. Ursula Fanthorpe used to write a new Christmas poem every year and send it out to her Christmas card list. She wrote a poem called BC: AD – playing on the new era that comes into being the first Christmas as the world moves from being 'before Christ' to 'after Christ' or 'anno domini', AD as we sometimes say.

BC: AD, Fanthorpe writes:

This was the moment when Before

Turned into After, and the future's

Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing

Happened. Only dull peace

Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.
And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect
Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

This was the moment – the first Christmas - when the kingdom of heaven began with the birth Jesus, the angels were heard once more on earth, and the golden age was ushered in. Only outsiders - farm workers and three members of an obscure Persian sect - responded to God's invitation to worship the child in the manger. It was a haphazard journey for both groups. For the shepherds, it took place at midnight as the clouds held back and whilst the world was asleep. The mystery of the kingdom of heaven crept in unnoticed, and as nothing had happened, in the birth of a helpless infant. God's moment to change the world had arrived.

This is the moment – tonight - in the deep unsatisfactoriness of our world. Its only God who can change the world. Its only God who can change the human heart by the power of his love. Its love revealed at Christmas that begins the age of gold, and it begins with me and you, with those of us gathered here in community tonight and with our local communities and networks where we live, where we work and where we gather for leisure. There is no other starting place for the message of Christmas love to be lived out than in our own lives and relationships.

May we become messengers of the good news of God's love at Christmas like the shepherds. May we like the shepherds not only hear God's message through the angels of peace, not only speak of what we hear in how we live our lives, but also return God's song back to heaven in our worship. As the carol dreams – may 'the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing'.

This is the moment that as human beings we dare not ignore. It is the moment of hope and of love for all humanity. May I wish you all a very happy and love-filled Christmas!

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