



## Sermon at Midnight Mass

## Midnight Mass

24 December 2021

Tonight we will sing of Bethlehem, a little town just outside the capital city, a place 2000 years ago of no particular significance. The name meant 'house of bread' and maybe because of this the prophets of Israel marked it out for the birthplace of a great ruler who would draw the people of God together, who would be a shepherd to the hungry and offer peace and security across the world.

Tonight Bethlehem stands isolated from much of its neighbouring territory, cut off by the infamous wall of separation that divides the state of modern Israel from the occupied territories of the West Bank. The problem runs deep. In 1922 at the end of the Ottoman Empire's rule Christians in the Holy Land were estimated at 73,000, some 10% of the population. A hundred years later Christians account for less than 2% of the Holy Land's population.<sup>i</sup>

In recent years Christians have suffered many numbers of physical and verbal assaults from extremist groups. These are radical fringe groups politically and religiously motivated. Recently two Jerusalem churches have been subject to attacks: sites have been desecrated and vandalised and the violence against Christians continues.

There are over two and a half billion Christians in our world who tonight celebrate the birth of God in human form. Throughout the history of Christianity Christians have had a significant presence in Jerusalem. This is under threat and because of the Separation Wall, Bethlehem is cut off from its neighbouring Christian villages, and year after year tourists stay a way. Add to that the impact of the Global Pandemic then Bethlehem is all *too* silent tonight. The night is *too* still and businesses in Manger Square are close to collapse.

And as we sing 'O little Town of Bethlehem' and 'Once in Royal David's City', let us celebrate the gift of bread to the world that Bethlehem in all its smallness offers. Later we shall proclaim the Christ whose life is the light of the world, God the bread of life come down to heaven. In the bread of Holy Communion is none other than God's food that we might be saved from our sins and live with him for ever. The one who gives himself to us, love in bread, is the one who pours out his love for us in the crib that is before us.

We have just prayed that all who gaze on it tonight will experience the love of God in their hearts. And the key to this is all around us in the building. During the season of Advent *as* we have taken time to prepare our hearts for the arrival of the infant Jesus tonight, so we have lit candles on our Advent ring. Four purple candles marking the weeks from Advent Sunday until we light the Christmas candle at our service led by the Bishop on Christmas morning.

Before us and around us there is a growing light. St John proclaims the word of God, our creator, who comes into the world as the light, banishing the darkness before it. The light of God burns fiercely all around us this night but is focused in the manger. This is God's love bursting into our lives with fire.

The warmth of the fire draws us towards the stable scene, it warms our hearts, it lifts our spirits. It is nothing else than the fire of God's love in front of us. Our hearts leap tonight, like John the Baptist's in the womb as his mother encountered the mother of Jesus fresh from the visit by the angel Gabriel. Our hearts leap with joy at the anticipation of heaven coming down to earth and earth rising to heaven, all in this infant child.

And if its love, its also love with energy for the salvation of the world. In Jesus is the judge of all that is wrong in our world. The God-man is the one who enables the transformation of the human heart. Divinity bundled up in our humanity. Humanity bundled up in God's life.

Here is the world's hope for a different kind of experience that overcomes our frustration at not being able to plan, our fear of viral infection, our worry about the pandemic's effect on our economy, our concern about our politics.

But listen – there is something not quite right! If we attend closely to what is in front of us, we hear a baby crying throughout the night. That's annoying. It means no sleep, it means nappies, it means that roughness of the wood of which the manger is crafted from and the uncomfortability that goes with this.

The Christmas story may well be the best known, the most beautiful and hopeful of all stories but it's the story of a real birth in all its messiness, of a real child who caught colds, sustained viral infections and whose health would have worried his mother Mary sick, even on that first night of his fragile life. 'The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes', we sing every year but how far is that from reality?

And the reality deepens as the local king, trapped by the fear of a rival, goaded by rumours, issues orders to kill all baby boys in and around the town of Bethlehem. It wasn't long before Jesus and his family were refugees, fleeing persecution on the road to an uncertain future in Egypt.

So, lets strip away the tinsel that surrounds the Christmas story and confront the reality before us. If God chooses to share our humanity, then he enters the fragility of our lives. Only a God who suffers in and alongside his people can be a God who brings salvation, and this is the God whom we worship tonight.

Wendy Cope the English poet, in her poem, *A Christmas Song*, captures the mood of the present moment so well.<sup>ii</sup> For Wendy Cope it's the crying of the infant child that stirs the imagination.

*Why is the baby crying  
On this, his special day,  
When we have brought him lovely gifts  
And laid them on the hay?*

He's crying for the people  
Who greet this day with dread  
Because somebody dear to them  
Is far away or dead,

For all the men and women  
Whose love affairs went wrong,  
Who try their best at merriment  
When Christmas comes along,

For separated parents  
Whose turn it is to grieve  
While children hang their stockings up  
Elsewhere on Christmas Eve,

For everyone whose burden  
Carried through the year  
Is heavier at Christmastime,  
The season of good cheer.

That's why the baby's crying  
There in the cattle stall:

He's crying for those people.  
He's crying for them all.

You get the point. The potentially harmful projection of an infant Jesus is replaced with the reality. The infant Jesus is crying *for us*. In our pain tonight we have a Saviour who has held nothing back from entering our lives with all our joys and hopes, our fears and anxieties. It doesn't matter whether we are a resident of Bethlehem who is reluctantly deciding to flee the persecution and the intolerable pressures of daily living or someone living in the City of Derby nervous about what the new year might bring. Wherever we are tonight our Saviour Christ is there for us, suffering with us and for us so that we might have hope in an unsatisfactory world.

In the uncomfortable wood of the manger lets see the foreshadowing of the cross. Like the stable its both hard reality and joy. The reality of a life that started on the outside in a lean-to because there was no room at the inn progressed to rejection by the religious establishment and crucifixion by the might of the Roman Empire. The joy that started with the song of the heavenly angels continued in the lives touched by Jesus' healing powers and then in the power of love revealed in the resurrection.

Whatever you bring to this Cathedral tonight – whether its unwelcome medical news, the death of a loved one, the anxiety of your first Christmas alone, concern for a family member or a close friend in their distress, or after a difficult operation – Jesus meets us tonight and once again is waiting for us to open our hearts to him. He offers us peace and harmony, the forgiveness of sins, a fresh start in our relationship with God.

Yesterday I encountered someone living alone who told me about their singing. They sing as they go around the house. No one else is there to hear them and they sing because it lifts their hearts. Later in the afternoon I was invited onto BBC Radio Derby to talk about the importance of singing carols and the positive effect it has on us. Singing carols directly increases our levels of wellbeing and happiness according to recent research and why is this?

its because Christmas is about memories, about recalling family time and for many of us it's been in the gathering with others that contain those memories. But its also because in our singing we connect with the greatest story ever told – a beautiful story about the work of God, God's involvement in the world, to bring salvation to all. In the singing of carols, we encounter the symbols of Christmas that are so powerful and draw us into its reality and joy. Not least of all it's the fire of God's love that captivates us and enables us to grasp once again what our creator does for us in Jesus.

Singing tonight, even behind our facemasks, lifts our spirits, we contribute to the well being of Derby and the County of Derbyshire, our communities and ourselves. The infant Jesus makes a practical difference in our lives, as individuals and in society.

So, lets listen carefully to the sound of the crying that comes from the manger. Here is Christ born for us, the one who cries for us, who lives for us and dies for us so that we might come into the presence of God. In bread broken tonight Christ comes to us and asks us to be open to the fire of his love, that we might burn as God's witnesses this night and for ever.

**The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson, Dean of Derby**

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<sup>i</sup> See the joint communication from the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, writing in the Sunday Time, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021

<sup>ii</sup> Wendy Cope, *Serious Concerns*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992