

25 December 2024 1st Eucharist of Christmas

Great St Mary's Cambridge

Midnight Mass Homily by Clare Stephenson

Carol

It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth
to touch their harps of gold:
'Peace on the earth, goodwill to men,
from heaven's all-gracious King!'
The world in solemn stillness lay
to hear the angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the angel-strain have rolled
two thousand years of wrong;
and man, at war with man, hears not
the love-song which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
and hear the angels sing!

Still through the cloven skies they come,
with peaceful wings unfurled;
and still their heavenly music floats
o'er all the weary world;
above its sad and lowly plains
they bend on hovering wing;
and ever o'er its Babel sounds
the blessed angels sing.

For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet-bards foretold,
when, with the ever-circling years
comes round the age of gold;
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendours fling,
and the whole world give back the song
which now the angels sing.

Collect

Eternal God, who made this most holy night
to shine with the brightness of your one true light:
bring us, who have known
the revelation of that light on earth,
to see the radiance of your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Isaiah 52.7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news, who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together
they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth
together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has
redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and
all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in
these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through
whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint
of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made

purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

John 1.1–14, 18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

(Luke 3:1-6)

SERMON

It is so easy isn't it to pass by the everyday mysteries of life in our 21st century haste? As we rush from thing to thing, we can fail to notice the mystery of a sunrise, or a bird feeding, or a kind act, the small signs of our children growing up, or of our friends growing older, or a star moving across the sky. And we recognise, perhaps with grief at a deep level, that these precious things pass us by all too often, and yet it is as if we are being driven on against our will from pausing, so that their mystery might be uncovered, sometimes swept in tides we can't avoid, but also swimming in tides of our own making.

And in the light of the pressures and the pace of our modern age, how striking it is that you have chosen to be here. At the still point of the night, as Christmas eve just about turns into Christmas day, after what I am sure has been for many of us, a few weeks of a breathless round of activity. Perhaps there is a part of us that knows we need such a time. A time to contemplate a mystery which has come to pass.

And the readings which are chosen for this the first Eucharist of Christmas, the Midnight mass, are about the most profound mystery. And we really do have to stop, even to begin to take in what they are saying.

You might have noticed that in them is no mention at all of those characters from a strange land in the distant past; all those who play their parts in that familiar Nativity story of hope; the virgin with child, the loyal Joseph, the difficult journey to Bethlehem, the hateful king Herod, the inn with no room, the ox and the ass, the hosts of angels and the guiding star and the shepherds and wisemen, with their journeys and offerings of gifts,

But actually, what we have just heard read to us amounts to another sort of Nativity story; it's a retelling that helps us to make sense of what happened in Bethlehem all those years ago. It is this retelling which means that the Christmas story is not simply an account of something which happened once in history, but is **also** happening all the time, everywhere... and that something is that God in Christ is being born into the world at **every** moment. This is mystical stuff, and we are in a not very mystical age. But it is all the more important to pause, and not to pass this mystery by, because it offers so much hope for our sometimes very hopeless feeling world.

Both the readings from the Hebrews and from the Gospel of John talk about how God creates, and that the creation is in the here and now. God continues to create through breathing out, through speaking, through his Word. And his word, his eternal word, is Christ who has been with God from the beginning. Through being breathed out, spoken, being a Word, Jesus Christ becomes the source of all things. What this is saying is profound indeed, that everything, all that we can see and touch and all that we can't see (such as those angels bending near the earth) is in a constant state of coming into being through the activity of God, and that includes all of us here, and all our words and music, and that activity has Jesus Christ, who is love, at its very depths. What we have heard read to us tonight is a nativity story telling of the constant birth of Christ in all creation.

And what the familiar nativity story offers to us is what this mystical birth is like. Jesus Christ's coming was as a baby into an unfamiliar town, at a time of oppression, and where there was no room for him. And our God continues to come into this world as an infant, willingly entering a place of poverty, and into a place where the profound potential and light of this new life shining out all around us, is recognised by only a very few. As St John said, "he came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him".

We don't like to think of our own inner poverty. It is another 21st century phenomenon that people's worth is measured in their possessions and talents, and many of us are burdened by a pressing need to hide those parts of ourselves or our lives which feel lacking in some way. But what the Christmas story is telling us, is when Jesus comes, it as an infant who was born into a place of poverty. For us to allow that birth, the dawning of light, breaking forth of grace and truth, in our lives, we can safely bring to God those parts of us that feel poor, empty, unvalued or broken, those parts that we keep in the shadows, for this is where, if we will let him, Jesus Christ will come with the gentleness of a new born child, to bring new life and light.

We will shortly be sharing together in the acts which Jesus wanted to be remembered by. A sharing of bread and wine with his friends. Even if this is not your tradition, please do consider on this holy night to join those taking communion, either in private prayer or by coming to receive a prayer of blessing, and in doing so let us join in praying for each other and for the world for the receiving of that everlasting light that shines, in love, in the darkness. **Amen.**