

Midnight Mass 2014

Rejoice and be glad, for today is born to you a Saviour! This word “today” comes up so many times in the Christmas liturgy – and, yet, how curious a word it is. Between Bethlehem in the year of grace and Preston in the year 2014, there seems to be no “today” but only a world of “yesterdays”, so many hundreds of years gone by. But in the lovely chant from the beginning of this Midnight Mass God the Father speaks to God the Son: *ego hodie genui te*: “thou art my Son; THIS DAY I have begotten Thee” (Ps 2:7). This is God’s “today”, the “today” of eternity: born in the flesh of the Virgin Mary in the fulness of time, Christ is born eternally from the bosom of the heavenly Father. Mary’s womb was the wedding chamber where the eternal Son espoused our human nature. In Christ it is God himself who comes to us. And when God comes into our world, nothing can ever be the same – *nothing* is as it was before.

My words, dear friends, are not sufficient to speak to you tonight of the splendour, the divine joy, of this coming of God into our lives. What human words can give voice to the mystery of God’s own Word? “The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us” (Jn 1:14). This is the only word we need. God himself spoke one Word, and that Word is Jesus Christ: God himself taking on our human nature. This does not, of course, mean that God *turned into* a man, in such a way that he would somehow have *stopped* being God: that is naturally impossible. The Incarnation means that Jesus Christ – who is true God *from all eternity*, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit – *also* became man *at a given moment in time* when, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, he assumed a human nature – like unto us in all things but sin. This central mystery of our faith is beautifully summed up in the Christmas liturgy: *Deus homo factus est*, “God is made man. That which he was, he remains; and that which he was not, he takes up” (January 1st, office of Lauds).

Bethlehem is not yesterday and far away; for us who believe, Bethlehem is here and always. In Hebrew, the word Bethlehem means literally “the house of bread”. Every Catholic church is a new and heavenly Bethlehem, for in our tabernacles under the outward form of bread dwells Christ himself. The same eternal Son who built the starry skies, the same divine child cradled in the manger, the same glorious Saviour who was born so that he could die for us, who broke the fetters of hell when he rose in glory from the dead: that same Jesus – not just a reminder, not just a symbol, but God-made-man himself – is with us today. In promising the Eucharist, Christ told us, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread,

he shall live for ever; and the bread that I will give, is my flesh, for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51-52).

I am sure you have heard this slogan, which is a useful reminder for us in our sad, secular world: “Keep Christ in Christmas.” In fact, however, we must go one step further if we are to understand the true spirit of Christmas: *Keep Mass in Christ-mas!* The mystery of the Eucharist is the perfect continuation of the mystery of Christmas. In the Incarnation Christ hid his divinity; in the Blessed Sacrament he hides now even his human nature. The Mass, as you know, continues to make present Christ’s redeeming sacrifice: God’s “today” enlivens and gives meaning to *our* today. The manger was the Offertory of Christ’s Mass: his perfect offering of himself for our salvation which began in Mary’s womb and was consummated on Calvary. In the Mass, the wood of the crib turns into the wood of the cross. Sleeping the sleep of a newborn between two animals who keep him warm, Jesus will one day sleep the sleep of death between two criminals. Come to the manger, and see how his arms are opened to embrace you today! One day, come to Calvary, and see how his arms are opened to die for you on the cross!

Perhaps we have no fine gifts to bring to the manger like the princely sages from the east, the gold, frankincense and myrrh which give light and fragrance to Christmas time: but could we not try to bring at least some straw to the crib of our Infant King? Some little thing to comfort him in his earthly exile: kindness to the poor, forgiveness to our enemies, sharing the faith with those who do not believe? Can we not do as Mary and Joseph: can we not clean out the little stable of our heart so that Christ can be born there tonight? When God-made-man comes to our Bethlehem will he find no room in the inn of our souls? If only this Christmas time, we could receive him worthily in holy communion – with love and gratitude – this same Eternal King whom the heavens cannot contain and yet who enclosed himself in the womb of the Virgin, this incarnate God will take up his dwelling in our hearts – in your heart and mine.

Lying in the manger, Jesus Christ was thinking already of each one of us. “Fear not, for I have redeemed thee, and called thee by thy name: thou art mine” (Is 41:1). Neither Herod then nor Pilate later could ever have the last word. Today, Lord, today you come to us. May this today be forever: do not let us stray! “This is the day which the Lord hath made: let us be glad and rejoice therein” (Ps 117:24).