

## Midnight Mass 2015

A poet once said, “the end of all our exploring, Will be to arrive where we started, And know the place for the first time” (*Little Gidding*, V). As we contemplate tonight the mystery of the Word-made-flesh – of God who now at last in the “fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4) takes on human nature to accomplish his plan of our salvation – I am reminded of these words as we look upon the Christ Child in his Crib. Is it not striking that Jesus Christ begins his earthly life in a borrowed cave, because there was no room at the inn, wrapped up in linen swaddling clothes, knowing in advance that 33 years later he would end his earthly life in another borrowed cave – the tomb lent by one of his secret disciples – wrapped up this time in a linen funeral shroud? This child born between two beasts, this man crucified between two criminals: he is the same God Almighty whose earthly throne in the Jerusalem Temple perched between two cherubim. “The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel hath not known me, and my people hath not understood” (Isaiah 1:3).

These thoughts help us, who have perhaps become too accustomed to the sentimental aspect of the Christmas story, to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time: to come on bended knee into the Crib this year and to remember that the new-born Baby in Mary’s arms beneath the star of Bethlehem will one day lie lifeless in her arms beneath the cross. We already know how the story ends: with a death and a resurrection. Yet we come back year after year, the eternal freshness of Christmas making us forget the passing years.

What do you think we would have heard in the stable if we could have been there at that first Christmas 2000 years ago? Hush, hush, don’t wake the sleeping Redeemer, but come and lean in closely. As God-made-man sleeps in his bed of straw, I seem to hear not so much a voice as an echo: even with eyes closed, the tender Babe sees the world around him – the world *he* made – and from within the depths of his soul he asks the question that he one day asked out loud to Peter: “and he asked his disciples, saying: ... But whom do you say that I am?” (St. Matthew 16:1-15). One question, so many answers!

*Mary*, who do you say that I am? Sweet Mother, more than anyone else you understand the true mystery of Christmas. With a mother’s love you gaze upon your baby son, but you look deeper, *Mary*: you see beyond the outward veil of flesh, the eternal Son of God: born eternally of the Father he now is born in time through you. You ponder the prophetic word which said, “he that made me, rested in my tabernacle” (Ecclesiasticus 24:12). O first and living ciborium, you invite us today not to the stable but to the tabernacle, that we may adore hidden under the veil of bread him whom you adored in his crib of

straw. *People of Bethlehem*, who do you say that I am? What: an inconvenience, an unwanted child? You could at least have seen a family in need and yet in your inn there is no room. "He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (St. John 1:11). *Shepherds*, who do you say that I am? You are simple men: the Pharisees of Jerusalem think nothing of you because you do not share their sophisticated learning. But you are men of the promise: you know only that God promised your Fathers a Redeemer and you know that he is faithful; you are not ashamed to live in the backwater of Bethlehem because you remember the prophet's word: "And thou Bethlehem art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be the ruler in Israel: and his going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2). The days marked out by the prophet have elapsed: now is the time for promise made to become promise fulfilled. The angel song is the reward of your humility, and you are the first ones invited to adore in the flesh the one whom Moses feared to see in the thunders of Sinai. *King Herod*, who do you say that I am? O saddest of sinners, the wilfully ignorant. The scribes of Jerusalem open to you the prophetic books: the finger of the centuries points out the Messiah. Not only do you refuse to adore, but you think you can destroy God's plan! We weep for you, poor Herod, when we see you at the head not of those who adore, but of the long line of dictators who think that they can build a human peace by refusing the Prince of Peace. The Holy Innocents, the victims of Roman persecution, those who fall to Mohammed's sword, the hordes massacred by Communism: their blood cries out for you, Herods old and new! Your names, O persecutors, pollute the dustbin of history: but the divine Child remains on his throne and he breaks your rod of iron.

And you, what about you, my dear friends sitting here tonight: who do YOU say that he is? Is he just a family tradition, a little statue we cart out once a year just to put him back in the cupboard when we have opened our gifts and eaten our pie? Do we feel threatened like Herod, somehow aware that if he is who he says he is, then we need to give him our whole life? Are we indifferent like the people of Bethlehem: is there no room in *our* inn, because it is over full with the little pet sins we don't want to give up? Come into the stable with me – we will wait for the shepherds to pay their humble homage – and let us see it anew as if for the first time. Tonight, heaven is all wrapped up in swaddling clothes. He is there waiting – waiting for you. Christmas is there to remind us that we also must decide. The world can never be the same once God enters it as one of us. *It is your turn now to come to the manger*. We won't wake the sleeping Babe, but our hearts whisper our response: "I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).