

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS

2008

Many would find it difficult to describe our society today as Christian, but it never ceases to surprise me that, in our post-Christian England, Christmas carols continue to be sung and broadcast all over the country. You can't go into any of our supermarkets or public places without the strains of familiar carols blaring out from the public address system. This is no accident and it helps to make this Christmas season so special. In fact, it makes me believe that, deep within the hearts of many, there is still a residual faith bringing a sense of comfort and stability to our lives. We relish it and we value it and we, who are perhaps regular worshippers, neglect this at our peril.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" is the carol that has caught my attention this year, partly because I read of an Anglican vicar who forbade his congregation to sing it on the grounds that it could no longer be said of Bethlehem "how still we see thee lie". Perhaps he had forgotten that there is such a thing as poetic licence, or perhaps, as Fr Steven reminded me yesterday, he has never stood at night on Portsdown Hill and seen the seeming peacefulness of our own city of Portsmouth.

Then, as now, Bethlehem was an occupied town, though in the time of Mary and Joseph, it would have been a great deal easier to gain access than it might be today. It could be argued – historically – that Bethlehem has never been the haven of peace that our Victorian carol writers wanted it to be. When Christ was born, the Romans were the occupiers and today Bethlehem finds itself on the front line of the continuing conflict and tension between Palestinians and Israelis. The reality of Bethlehem today has not changed very much. It is as true today, however, as it was then that, although its people walked in darkness, then as now, they have seen a great light.

The carol goes on to sing that "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight..." because "in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." This "entering in" is the reason for our gathering and longing tonight; this is the birth of Jesus Christ who saves us and leads us into the light, a fact as true today as it was on the day that Christ was born.

I spoke earlier of a residual Christian faith, held by many, which gives us comfort and strength when we choose to acknowledge it. But for many, it is perhaps only residual. As a nation we have been caught up in the worship of false gods and they can seem much more compelling and immediate. They carry names like prosperity for its own sake, the ruthless quest for success. Their temple is the Stock Exchange and they entice us into an instant society which fools us into thinking we can have everything we want when we want it – and without having to pay for it for years.

These gods are failing us now – they have feet of clay - and we come to Bethlehem tonight with “the hopes and fears of all the years”. Our futures are not as secure as they were; we have anxieties about jobs and fears about housing and mortgages. That world of prosperity, which has so seduced us, now suddenly seems so fragile.

Our false gods have betrayed us. As the Psalmist writes: “They have mouths but say nothing, have eyes but see nothing, have ears but hear nothing, have noses but smell nothing...” No, “our God is in heaven...House of Israel, rely on the Lord, he is your help and your shield” or as our carol puts it: “In thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.”

It's this light that brings us here tonight; it brings us to Bethlehem and we come to place all our hopes and fears at the feet of the Christ child because he is the son of the only true God, and only He can lead us into the fullness of the life for which we long. He does not promise us money or success or prosperity. His gift to us, if we can bring ourselves to kneel humbly at his Crib with arms outstretched and ask for it, is peace without end, fairness, justice, integrity and love.

Come to the Crib then and adore the one who has been born for us and given for us. Come to the one who holds the key for the meaning and purpose of our lives. Come to him, bow before him in humility and in our need. Stoop low to enter the stable and discover there, in his humility, what gives us our dignity and what brings true purpose and fulfilment to our lives. We need to place all our hopes and fears into the hands of the Lord of all who has come to us and who shares his life with us.

This is why Christ was born; this is why we celebrate his birthday with such solemnity and joy. Christians have done so throughout the centuries. We do so today because our celebration brings us hope when, as today, we find ourselves abandoned and betrayed by our false gods.

St Paul sums it all up when he writes to Titus that “God’s grace has been revealed and has made salvation possible for the whole human race. It has taught us that all we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God...we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives.” He sets us free from all idolatry and emptiness so that we can be his brothers and sisters and have no greater ambition than to belong to him in love and peace.

I pray that this love and peace will be his gift to you and may become your deepest experience as we celebrate this Christmas feast on this holy night.