

## Christmas Midnight Mass

### St John's Cathedral

2010

At the time of the first Christmas, that birthday of Christ for which we gather to celebrate tonight, the whole known world – the world of the Roman Empire – was on the move. The Emperor had decreed a census which required everyone going to their own town to be registered. Joseph, with Mary, betrothed yet pregnant with the Christ child, was going to Bethlehem, the town of David where the prophets had foretold that the Messiah would be born.

If the most recent film portrayal of that journey is to be believed – and why shouldn't it be, because the details in the Gospel are very sparse – Joseph was wrestling and agonising over the fact that Mary, his betrothed, was pregnant and he was not the father of the child. It cannot have been a peaceful or particularly loving journey for them.

The same film – The Nativity – which has been carried all this week on BBC1, also shows the Magi journeying from the East, following the star that would indicate for them the birth of a great king and their journey too was beset with threats from King Herod.

This was a time of movement and journey – and all were being drawn to the light of their homes. A people, who were in darkness, were being drawn to a light which somehow was going to bring hope and warmth to their lives.

The celebration of Christmas today is also a time of journeying. Thousands of people at this time are instinctively drawn back to their roots, to their families and to the memories of earlier Christmases and of happy times of celebration. Today's journeys are no less difficult or demanding and the recent troubles in the air and on land have vividly reminded us of this. Nevertheless, for whatever reasons – the call of faith or family or both – there is a sense that it is important to be at home at this time. There is a light that draws us all and without our necessarily knowing why, it warms our hearts. We cannot, as T.S. Eliot puts it "cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." (Little Gidding)

We are drawn to the light which we have all glimpsed in the love of family and in the light of faith. For us in the family of faith, that light comes because there is a child born for us, a son given for us. He was laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn. That birth was welcomed by the angels and the first to come to adore at the manger were the shepherds who were keeping watch in the fields.

But where, in the simplicity of the stable and the manger, is the light for us? The answer for me lies in some words from the Song of Songs, read at Mass earlier in this week. God, in his love for the human family which he created in his own image and likeness, continues and never ceases loving us even in the darkest moments of our lives. Now he stands and looks in at the window of our lives, peering, as the writer puts it, through the lattice, saying to me and to you, "come then, my love, my lovely one come. For see, the winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth. The season of glad songs has come."

None of us are very good at loving ourselves, except in self-indulgent ways and often at the expense of others. And yet, here in the birth of Christ, God is calling us lovely and beautiful, penetrating the darkness of our personal lives and of our world, with that love that is so great that he sends his only son, to convince us of our value and dignity. And the evidence is here in the crib. The child, who is lying helpless and poor in the crib, is the Wonder-Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Eternal Father, the Prince of Peace. He is the jealous lover who bids us come.

This is not complicated and it's not full of the so-called sophistication of our complicated and complex lives. It is, as Eliot writes – and I make no apology for quoting him again – " a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything) and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." (Little Gidding).

God loves the world so much that he gives his only Son, writes St John, and echoing those words, St Paul writes "God's grace has been revealed and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race...he sacrificed himself for us...so that we could be his very own and would have no ambition except to do good."

In our journey's end to the crib tonight, that place where we find all our beginnings, adore the Lord who calls into his light. In that light, pray that we can see ourselves again as God's beloved children. This is the Christmas story and you and I have a vital part to play in the telling of it today. Return home tonight, glorifying and praising God for all that you have heard and seen.