

Midnight Mass 2007

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” Isaiah 9:2

One of the most over-used words at Christmas time is the word “tradition”. We comfort ourselves with the knowledge that what we are doing at this time of year has been done for many generations and centuries before us. Of course, in many cases, this is simply untrue. In Britain many of our supposedly age-long traditions were invented in the nineteenth century, and much of Christmas falls into that category. Traditions, also inevitably change their meanings and their resonance according to the context in which they are practised. Midnight, for example, has lost much of its meaning. As the word itself suggests, it belongs in a time when day and night were ruled by darkness and light, and the middle of the night was the time between retiring some time after 6pm and rising some time before 6am. When that ageing gentleman of the night, Sir John Falstaff, reminisces to his friend Justice Shallow that “we have heard the chimes at midnight”, it is a sign of their reckless youth – only the young, wild and free would have been awake and about at midnight itself. Now, of course, midnight is not the middle so much as the beginning of the night, and working adults who are asleep before midnight will doubtless count themselves lucky.

What has changed is artificial lighting. We are no longer ruled by the sun. We control night and day, decide when it begins and ends, by pressing a switch. We flood the darkness with light and carry on with gay abandon until our legs or our livers finally give up.

So here we are at midnight, and it is not dark. Yes of course we call it dark outside, but the fact is none of us needs to carry a torch to come in or out of church. There are plenty of lights outside, and as we journey home after this service we will doubtless encounter more and more of those lights, Christmas lights which blaze into the night sky the fact that the festival of lights, the time of year for shouting and rejoicing, for eating and drinking, has come again, and darkness has no place in our lives. We are in control, we can banish the darkness and midnight – genuine, lightless, frightening midnight – is nothing to worry about.

Light, however, can be a dangerous thing. It is not enough for us simply to be illuminated, we need to control the illumination. We need to decide where and when the light is going to shine in order to be completely comfortable, in order to be sure that an unwanted, unexpected light isn't going to come and flood into those corners of our lives that we are determined to keep in darkness. If I am holding the light, if I have my finger on the switch, then I am in control. If someone

else is positioning the floodlights, if someone else is plugging in the cable, then who knows what will be seen when the power is turned on.

God comes to us in darkness. The inescapable irony of this night-time celebration is that we flood midnight with light, we celebrate God's coming by illuminating our churches, our houses, our towns and cities, by celebrating the light with overcomes darkness. But whose light is it? Luke's gospel tells us that when Jesus was born he was found in an animal trough, not paraded for all to see. Luke's gospel tells us that the people chosen to receive the news were not the great and the good but those on the outside, those whose untouchable job it was to take turns watching over their sheep outside the city and in the middle of the night. Theirs was real darkness – not just the lack of modern electrical lighting, the lack of any light at all, except perhaps a tiny fire which they used in their struggles to keep warm. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. When we portray or think of this moment we make it so like our own understanding of light, a gentle flood illuminating a picturesque scene, but Luke tells us one thing and one thing only about the shepherds' reaction: they were terrified.

I suspect that you and I are also somehow terrified by all of this. Terrified by midnight, and terrified by darkness, so that we exert our control over it and refuse to allow its existence. Midnight is no longer

really midnight and we have nothing to worry about. Except that, however we delude ourselves, our lights remain artificial, and our dark corners remain dark. In that darkness we stow away our fears and our insecurities, the self-pity that no-one else understands, the self-loathing that no-one else suspects, the self-harming inner life that is ultimately afraid to embrace and to love that which we can't control or comprehend. And so we shine our lights elsewhere, illuminate the other things, the safe things, the bold public face of success and wealth and prosperity and hope against hope that no-one will ask us to shine the light any further or to light up those dark and forgotten places.

But the problem for us is that God comes to us in darkness. In the silence of a pitch black night God slips unseen, unheard into our world and into our lives. Despite all our efforts to illuminate midnight, to shine our lights and control what everybody can see, God comes to us on the margins, on the fringe, in those dark corners that we wish to avoid, shining his light into those parts of our lives that we pretend are not really there. And there is nothing artificial about God's light. It is real, and it transforms, so that once our frightened and failing selves are shown up for what they are nothing can ever be the same. God's light is the light of revelation, it shows us not just God with us in Jesus Christ, it shows us ourselves, our true selves, in all their embarrassing glory. No wonder we are terrified. But the angel's words are clear: do not be

afraid. For the light of Christ will not just illuminate our dark places, it will banish them once and for all, it will take the things hidden in darkness and put every one of them in the darkest places of all – fixing them to a cross against a sky bereft of light, walling them up in cold, stone tomb of pitch black night. It will shut them away in darkness, only for us to find that when light floods that tomb three days later, there is actually nothing there at all.