

## **Midnight Mass and Christmas Day 2016**

This afternoon I had my first taste of Naked Mulled Wine. I asked our host why it was naked. He said: 'because it didn't have any cloves'.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is the most wonderful time of the year and I am so pleased that you have chosen to join us for this special occasion when we celebrate the birth of our Lord. I would like to begin by saying thank you! Thank you for your support.

I especially want to thank all those whose commitment and faithfulness has provided a vital piece in the cog that has helped the wheels of this church turn, and helped it to grow in unimaginable ways. Our church has grown and thrived as we have seen it become more open and inviting on Sundays, throughout the week and in its outward service to our communities. All of this has only been made possible because people have been stepping forward to commit their time, energy and resources to ensure that God's work can be done.

But, of course, this is nothing new. This church holds the real-life stories of thousands and thousands of individuals, past and present. Today it continues to walk alongside every person who opens their heart to God amidst all the joys and struggles of life.

So thank you, one and all.

Our job is never done. And there is so much more we can and should do as we continue the journey together. This church will remain healthy so long as we remember why we are here. And we find the answer to that in one simple sentence from tonight's Gospel reading:

**'The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us'.**

We come because of a little child born many centuries ago. We come because he showed us not only how to live good lives, but how to live in tune with the very life-force of the universe. Christ shows us that when we live in tune with God, we experience life in all its fullness, a life that nothing on earth can deteriorate, even when our bodies fail us. Without God we become spiritually empty, and although our bodies may still function, we have no real life left in us. But to live in God's Spirit is to live in the life of Christ. This is more than simply existing in the flesh; it is to live in the essence of life itself.

The birth of Jesus is not just a tale of a cute baby born in a stable, any more than it is an invite to shop till we drop. It is a story of a pregnant teenage single mother and her reluctant partner. It recounts how a fatherless child was born into extreme poverty even though he is the King of the world. It recalls a family being driven out of their home and becoming refugees because of persecution and oppression in their

homeland. The birth of Jesus tells us of how God steps into humanity's self-made plight and offers a solution. It is the story of God being willing to descend into every aspect of the messiness of human society, even torture and death, so that the whole of humanity may be freed from its own tyranny.

The birth of the Christ-child shows us this and so much more. But for most of us, the challenge isn't in understanding how we can live the good life, nor how we can live in a way that brings us closer to God – we know the basics only too well. The difficulty comes in actually doing it!!!

We can see the sacrifices that we need to make, but our nerve too often fails us. As we tread, day by day, so many things derail us. Too often we say, "I do believe, but it is inconvenient at the moment – I'll make the necessary steps tomorrow". Well what if tomorrow never comes?

The poor choices that we make at first seem irrelevant, but soon they become habit and if we are not careful we suddenly feel further away than when we first began.

The trouble is, the Christian journey is a long one and it can seem rather boring and monotonous. Neither is it very often glamorous. And so, it is difficult for the Christian life to compete with the attractiveness of our celebrity culture or the daily excitement we crave.

But it has ever been thus. The formidable theologian and author, C.K. Chesterton, wrote about the Christian challenge and through his writing, we see that things were not so very different one hundred years ago. He says: ***‘Christianity is always out of fashion because it is always sane; and all fashions are mild insanities’.***

Those of us who have teenage children, will recognise the wisdom in Chesterton’s words. Rarely do fashion trends seem to make much sense at all. That is why fashions come and go so quickly – they make no sense, they are literally madness! And our fashion trends, personal or business, make no more sense whether we are 60 or 16.

***‘Christianity is always out of fashion because it is always sane; and all fashions are mild insanities’.***

Christ comes to show us a new way. That God should descend to earth as one of us is quite remarkable and wondrous. And if we let it, it transforms our scepticism into new hope.

One would think the all-powerful God would come in riches and comfort, that he would force us to bow down and submit to his mighty power. Yet he turns all this on its head as he shows us that true richness is to be found in service and sacrifice; that we move closer to God through poverty than through wealth. His power comes not from the fashions of our human age; such things as posturing, manipulation, force and aggression.

Christ's power is found in gentleness, compassion and mercy. In Christ, we see a God so compassionate and merciful that he is willing to descend to earth so that we may ascend to heaven. He is so troubled by our situation, that he comes to meet us where we are and asks us to follow him, so that he can love us and protect us. That is all he asks, that we follow him so that he can keep us safe.

In another work, Chesterton tells the tale of a 'free thinker' in discussion with a Christian.

"What", he asks, ... "is the difference between Christ and Satan?"

"It is quite simple", replies the Christian. "Christ descended into hell; whilst Satan fell into it".

"Does it make much odds?" asks the free thinker.

"It makes all the odds", says the Christian. "The Devil wanted to go up and consequently went down; Christ wanted to go down and consequently went up".

People may follow both, but depending on which character they model their lives upon determines which route they will ultimately take.

The descending of God in the form of Christ is a remarkable act that turns all earthly conceptions of authority and power on its head. Christ comes to serve and to save. No longer are we

valued according to what we own or the strength of our arm. In Christ, we are loved for who we are and we share that love by replicating him in service and devotion. To serve Christ is to sacrifice our previous way of life for one that rests on service and compassion, where we give all of ourselves, not just the little bit we have left over; our time, energy, talents and resources to serve Him.

The story of Christ brings fresh hope to the poor, the widow, the homeless, the sick, the dying, the fatherless, the refugee, the addict, the tortured, the imprisoned, the oppressed. All, no matter what, are offered the free love they need to rescue them from a world that would otherwise devour them. This is why we celebrate this day. This is why the birth of Christ is such a momentous celebration. This is why we party and spoil each other, because every one of us is offered acceptance and love through the greatest gift the world has ever known – a gift of God's own son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Because **'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'**.

I hope this Christmas will bring you and yours every blessing.

Amen