

Midnight Mass 2017

Welcome to Midnight Mass. The Eve of Christ's Mass, is a most wonderful time of year, when we are reminded that 'the Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it'.

Midnight Mass is one of the most transformative celebrations of the church year. This is the evening when we are treated to a spiritual melody of sensual overload. The wonderful ambience of the late evening, the flicker of the candles alight, the mist and aroma of the incense rising, and the gathering of the community around the holy Altar in God's own house. If our hearts are open to all of this, it makes us feel at one in a special sense with a most special moment of eternity. A moment that transcends our own lives, even time itself, as though God had planned this encounter since before time began. Even the first human God ever created, Adam, was aware of its splendour when he shouted to his wife the night before Christmas – "It's Christmas Eve!".

Midnight Mass is rich, deep, meaningful. Then there are all the things we bring with us, not just our worries and woes, but also our expectation, our hope and our joy.

Over the last few weeks, as the cards have dropped onto the doormat and the arrangements have been made, we have all felt a sense of heightening excitement. Just this morning, I received

a card that seemed extra special even before I opened it. As I lifted it from the mat, I could feel something rustling inside. I carefully tore open the fold in the envelope, and I discovered to my delight that the card was full of rice. It was only then that I realised it was from my uncle Ben.

But Christmas can also be a time for us to come to terms with disappointments. Which of us in this digital age hasn't felt the frustration of a present not arriving in the post on time? Like Snow White realising her special photos haven't arrived and saying to herself; "one day my prints will come".

We all bring disappointments small and great. Disappointments that in some parts of our lives the Light is still engaged in a battle to overcome the darkness. Disappointments that opportunities to make the world a better place have been missed, or that we haven't yet sorted that part of our lives that we know needs resolving before we can move forward. For all of us, on some level, we await the time when the light of Christ will win its battle within us and in our world at large.

But Christmas brings that hope and assurance, that God has not, and will never, give up on us. The light that shines in the darkness, Jesus Christ, is good news for all creation. Even the dogs rejoice in singing their own devotional carol, 'Bark the Herald Angels sing'. For every living thing ever created is a part of this momentous blessing.

So as you eagerly await the sumptuous feast that has been prepared for you on the holiest day of the year; whether it is the traditional roast dinner, or like Good King Wenceslas, his favourite pizza which is deep-pan, crisp and even, remember that Christmas day is for the sharing. The sharing of gifts, of good-will, of each other. Think of the poor skeleton who couldn't go to the Christmas party because he had no-body to go with. If you've been given an invite, accept it with gratitude, excitement and joy. And think and pray for those for whom this Christmas will be a lonely one, especially those for whom this will be their first Christmas alone. Maybe an invite to tea would be the greatest gift you could offer someone in this season of good-will.

Because 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it'.

To risk repeating a cliché; Christmas is not about the number or size of the presents nor the amount of money spent. After all, once you begin playing the money game it can only result in increased selfishness and greed. It is a vicious circle; round and bad tempered. That's why I was heartened when I saw that no-one had placed a bid for Rudolph and Blitzen on Ebay. It is thought that they remained unsold, because they were too dear. In fact, my parents often say that the best present they ever brought me was a broken drum - because you can't beat it!

So, think of Father Christmas as he is lacing the reindeer's water with Red Bull to give them their wings for a tough winter night's work. We all know how he feels to be overworked at this time of year. For many, they make Christmas so busy with all the shopping and obsession with detail that they end up entirely missing the point. They stop seeing what is to be gained from simple belief in the little child born in a manger. It is often expressed that, in our modern world, busyness may well be the biggest threat to our souls, leaving us with no time to sit and listen for God's still small voice, nor to ponder the bigger questions of life that none of us can escape. Questions of life, death and eternity.

For example, have you ever had the time to ponder how much Jesus weighed at birth? Well, some rather sketchy first-century documents suggest that he may have weighed 7lb and 5oz. Apparently, Mary and Joseph had a weigh in the manager.

And, in this season of great joy, please don't forget all those who are less fortunate than you. Even St Nicholas has had to visit hospital this year because of his poor elf. A simple prayer for the poor, the sick, the homeless, the abused, the imprisoned will do more than you can possibly imagine. And maybe, in your prayers, you might even be moved to help in some way.

Because 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it'.

So I hope that this Christmas will be the best one you've had for many years. Not because of the amount of presents you receive, nor because of the amount of work you have put into the decorations or the Christmas meal, but because of the love you share and receive. And I hope that that love may spread to everyone around you. Not just your family, though surely them too, but also the entire community. Because through God's own son and the love we show in our hearts as a result, 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it'.

Then, once all the rejoicing is done, there will be plenty of time to get back to topical issues of the day with a little New Year's telly, which I believe includes a Deal or No Deal special, live from Brussels.

I hope and pray you have a very merry Christmas, filled with all the blessings of the Christ-child, and that the New Year may bring us all renewed hope and joy.

Amen.

R. T. Parker-McGee 2017