

Mass for Midnight 2024

A special welcome to those of you who are visiting us tonight - in the country's happiest town! In some of my Christmas cards this year, some old friends have now said they want to come and see us next year, whom we haven't seen for years!

Funny that, the draw and power of the media; "bah, humbug!" But even more curious for someone like me (in a more philosophical mood) asks: 'How do we judge happiness?' For many it will be the draw of the riverside, the number of pubs and restaurants, the shops or schools...you name it. Hopefully, part of our self-reflection will also be about our love for that sense of belonging and community, how much we care for one another and are proud to say 'this is home'.

For most of us here tonight, I am sure, we speak and believe this is our 'spiritual home' and Mary, the Mother of God, plays a special place in our hearts because of whom she gave birth to on this holy night – in a barn that represents a temple and tower – our spiritual 'strength and stay'. Even though our church heating has packed up completely, I am not really talking about buildings at all, however much I love this one. No, our common happiness stems tonight, from our roots and inheritance in an historic and biblical past. It is when BC changed to AD. If I may quote from a wonderful poet, Quaker, and friend, UA Fanthorpe:

"This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do

Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect

Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.”

Isn't that the most fantastic description of why we come to worship tonight, what draws us here to our spiritual home that is our temple? As the clock passes over the midnight hour and a new dawn breaks, surely we can, with God's loving guidance, dream and plan for a better world, and a more peaceful, just and hope-filled future?

A couple of Sundays ago I said, mistakenly, that I was looking forward to hearing a new carol called 'The Astronaut's Carol' whereas, in fact, it is called 'The Astronomer's Carol'. With the first I was perhaps 'overthinking' not least about that overestimated, over-rich and self-indulgent figure of Elon Musk. With the second (I am showing my age now) I have fond memories of 'The Sky at Night' and that intense, wrinkled and passionate face of Patrick Moore! I so wished I could have studied the stars, the galaxy and beyond because of his enthusiasm and charisma, but I digress...

The Astronomer's Carol has fantastic organ accompaniment but I am still perplexed by the scientific detail of Jennifer Thorp's text. It only confirms my ignorance of being an astronomer and star-gazer! '*Sequimini stellas per noctem*', is the chorus. Translated or not, I can still wonder and, like you, rejoice in God's majestic mystery of creation both known and unknown. We can still celebrate on this holy night those words from Robert Crashaw in the 17th century:

“Welcome, all Wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span.
Summer to winter, day in night,
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little one! Whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.”

I dare to suggest at this late hour: that science and theology, poetry and music, not only meet tonight but embrace one another. The Gospel of the Incarnation from St John we have heard and proclaimed goes deeper: “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth”.

The Lord of sea and sky, the oceans and planets, and all that God has made and holds dear, bless each one of you this Christmas, and all whom you love, all whom you miss.

Hold on to the inspiring Christian faith and Christmas story we have inherited, know and love - which speaks of lasting happiness and eternal truth, *wherever* we live, and which - abides in us, when *we* jump straight into the kingdom of heaven. Amen.