

Sermon for Midnight Mass

“This will be a sign for you; you will find a child wrapped in swaddling bands and lying in a manger”

Luke 2.12

Tonight, the angel Gabriel delivers the message of hope for this Christmas and for all time. Gabriel delivers it to the shepherds, and to us in our own time and place. The message is the one we know - of a babe lying in a manger. It becomes what the angel also calls ‘a sign’. Tonight, to a world attentive to these things, we might well ask “What kind of a sign is this?” The angel is certainly clear to the shepherds as to time and place. Angels are nothing if not precise in the directness and swiftness of their messaging because angels fly on wings! The message of Gabriel is, however, clear - that this child is the longed-for Messiah. He is of God and in God. Here is the message of all messages, bringing with it the imparting of the divine gift to all who would accept it. Bringing with it, too, a revolution in the order of things in a renewal of faith; of mind, heart and soul.

For the Christian Church, the birth of the Saviour signifies the selfless love that God has for us his people. This is the God who will place great trust in humanity and in human destiny. And God will choose what so often seems unlikely persons and circumstances. He places his trust in each one of us and wishes similarly to guide and direct us on our human journey through this brief life. The sign of Jesus, of God made human, is the one which emanates from God’s very heart. Never before and never again would such a manifest disclosure of the divine love take place. And so, as the carol proclaims, his ‘wondrous gift is given’. It is being given tonight to you and me out of God’s defenceless love.

The scope of the Christmas purpose from God’s perspective is vast and yet the human sign of the baby wrapped in swaddling bands is basic and simple. A sign which, in the manifest complex of this world’s being, draws us to the simple fact of a baby born to a couple on the move and barely capable themselves of fully understanding the destiny which God’s intervention had visited upon them. But in this way, and through their co-operation, The Emmanuel, the God-with-us, imparts God’s love for us. In turn, God’s desire is that we offer our own gift, which is the love responded to, the love returned, the love reciprocated.

“What you are is God's gift to you, what you become is your gift to God.”

(Hans Urs von Balthasar)

The year 2024 has been significant for the signs we have been given of our shared humanity in all its various colours, being both bright and uplifting and also dark and unsettling. We may remember with joy the city of Paris and of the joy of the Olympic Games and the carrying of the torch of unity and hope. The joy of witnessing those who know what it is to struggle against the odds and to win through. And then more recently

the glorious opening of the Cathedral of Notre Dame. The opening of the great west door, the heart stopping summoning of the grand organ into great voice, the calling out for the ringing of new bells and the anointing of the new altar. Then the special welcome for the firefighters alongside the craftspeople who have restored the cathedral to a glory not seen since Medieval times, and lit now as they could never have imagined. Even the stones glisten! It has been a once in a lifetime spectacle of human care and cherishing, and has provided for the people what President Macron called 'a shock of hope'. This same shock of hope was felt by Mary and Joseph and the shepherds as they made what they had imagined to be an ordinary kind of journeying. The shock of God's intervention shared with those who beheld it. We tonight are the ones experiencing that same shock of hope as hope itself is elevated in the Emmanuel, in the child Jesus, the 'God with Us'.

The enemy of hope is that place and those persons which is for the extinguishing of such hope. The sorry pictures of the looted luxury penthouse in Syria of the tyrant Assad provided a picture of the outward trappings of power and the empty shell of his so-called regime. There is nothing bleaker to the eye than the emptying out of something that was empty in itself, the showing of something evil and vain. The freeing of the tortured prisoners is one glad sign that something new might emerge out of the darkness which is the contempt for life and love. We pray tonight for the beleaguered Christian communities in Syria alongside the joyous worshippers in a new and beautiful Notre Dame. Jesus was born in a world not so very different from our own. A world of stark contrasts. He is the sign that out of the terrible mix of this world's good and evil comes new life and an ever renewing awareness of the persistence of faith with the shock of hope.

The sign for us tonight is that of Jesus the child, born into a stable at Bethlehem. It is a sign that has meaning for so many persons, whether of Christian faith or none. It is a sign, like the tolling of new Notre Dame bells, like those who carry the torch of freedom, which illumines our existence in the great and timeless realm of hope. It is a sign, the best Christmas gift of all, that God is love and that in Him there can be no person or place where that love cannot be made whole.

Amen

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