

## Midnight Mass

Isaiah 52: 7-10

Hebrews 1:1-12

John 1: 1-14

This familiar Gospel passage, which read every Christmas, contains some of the most poetic and powerful words you can find anywhere in the Bible

Unlike Matthew and Luke, John isn't interested in sheep or shepherds, mangers or swaddling clothes or Jesus' human ancestry. The reason why John doesn't give us any of the details you find in the other two Gospels is because he is far more interested in what Jesus's birth means for us.

The very first verse of John's Gospel speaks to that. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. It identifies the Word as God but also as separate from God. Another way of putting it is that as God's Word Jesus is God's self-expression. So Jesus is both God's representative and also the representation of God.

John's use of the word Logos to describe Jesus/ the Christ allows him to link the creation story in Genesis with Greek philosophy, in other words to appeal to both Jews and Greeks. They can both agree that the existence of the created order depends on the Logos. The point John is making is that it is God's Word that animates the world.

And of course what the Incarnation reveals is that God chose to reveal both his representative and his self-representation to humanity in the form of Jesus. Wow. In becoming flesh like you and me, God becomes far more than some spiritual concept. It

is in Jesus becoming flesh that God's glory can shine through us very ordinary human beings, flawed and broken as we are.

As Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible in the Message puts it, Jesus came to live in the neighbourhood. And John the Gospel writer is absolutely clear as to why? So that we could become children of God as well as being the children of our parents.

The incarnation tells us that each of us – from the newest baby to the oldest person in the world – has infinite importance in God's eyes. Even when we have messed up in some big way – and we have all messed up big time, one way or another – that means we can still look at ourselves in the mirror and say that we are God's child, deserving of love and respect.

We may find that hard to believe, but perhaps it becomes easier if we look at Jesus' human genealogy, the genealogy that John ignores. Jesus's ancestors, Matthew tells us, included adulterers, murderers, prostitutes and pretty well every other kind of sinner you can imagine. Jesus shows us how God can use human dysfunction for the good. God works with us as we are, particularly in our weaknesses. What Good News that is.

And what other truths does John tell us? Well, that there is darkness in the world. We know that of course, we see it every day. But equally we are assured that the darkness has not overcome the light. Just as we have the unity of the Word being in God and of God, we also have the disunity of the light and darkness being in opposition to each other

Other truths John points to include the fact that although the world came into being through Jesus, it did not recognise him. And not only did the world not recognise Jesus, it also rejected him. Yet it was through that very rejection, the crucifixion, that

Jesus achieved his greatest victory. The light overcame the darkness.

Even acknowledging the darkness – and heaven knows how much darkness there is in the world at the moment – can limit it and even rob it of some of its power. Sometimes we need to name our griefs and losses, we shouldn't pretend that all is well just because we are Christians when it is patently obvious that all is not well.

And yet.

As I mentioned just now John assures us that the light, in other words Jesus, the Christ who was with God even before creation, cannot be overcome by the darkness, that love cannot be overcome by hate, that life is more powerful than death.

It is that truth that offers hope, it is that truth enables us to have faith, it is that truth that gives us the courage to carry on when carrying on seems so hard. It is precisely because the infinite Christ chose to become finite in terms of becoming human that we can be assured that God is in everything we see around us

Not only did God come to live that truth out, but God chose not to have any special privileges for himself when becoming human. Rather he gave the rest of us the best possible gift and what's more gave it with no strings attached. As Richard Rohr has put it so graphically, Jesus, the eternal Christ, is like free Wi-Fi and all we need to do is connect

But there is a lot more to it than that isn't there. If Jesus came to restore us to relationship with God so that we can be God's

hands and feet on this planet, then part of that is helping those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

And there are plenty of such people at the moment, aren't there? We may be past the worst of the COVID pandemic, but that has been replaced by the cost of living crisis, forcing many people, especially the elderly and the poorest, to choose between eating and heating.

In addition, we are only just now beginning to see the full cost of the pandemic in terms of dangerously delayed treatment for people with cancer and other life-threatening illnesses.

Elsewhere in the world, the war in Ukraine has resulted in enormous casualties on both sides as well as forcing hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to leave their homes and leave behind their most precious possessions to seek shelter elsewhere, often abroad and for some of them that means Britain. And we shouldn't forget the ongoing conflicts elsewhere, especially in Myanmar, Yemen and much of the Middle East.

As Prince of Peace, Jesus must be appalled at the tragic waste that war represents, especially as each and every person caught up in violent conflict is just as precious to God as those who are more fortunate than they are. We mustn't forget that.

In conclusion, the wonderful thing about Christmas is that it is a concrete demonstration of God's love for us, and every year we get the opportunity to affirm that we believe that God is still present and he is still pouring out his grace and mercy in the face of all that is wrong with the world.

Part of our response to that – at least to the outside world – is to witness to what is God is doing for us, just as John the

Gospel writer pointed to John the Baptist as a witness. And for ourselves we need to remember that, just as the incarnate Jesus depended on his earthly parents to meet his needs as a baby and a child, we too are dependent on God for all that really matters in our lives.