

Sermon – Midnight Mass 2023. Christmas - a mixture of magic and murky

This is going to sound really cheesy, but I am really happy to be preaching here this evening. I hope you are going to be equally happy in 10 minutes time when I've finished.

I moved to the East Midlands a couple of years ago and last year we were with family down in Brighton, but this is the first Christmas we have spent here where we've made our home and are beginning to put down roots.

My main job as a priest has been to be the Chaplain of a very big school in North London which was fortunate enough to have its own chapel. Celebrating midnight mass there was an awesome experience because I was able to light the chapel just by using several hundred candles.

The chapel had been built in 1865 and dedicated to St Michael and all angels. So up in the roof, painted on the ceiling, was a host of pre-Raphaelite angels and archangels, comets and golden stars. In the twinkling light of the candles something very special happened. It was a magical setting.

When I retired from there I worked for six years as a Church of England priest looking after ex-pats in west coast France. For Sunday services I was sometimes able to use a local Catholic church, sometimes a protestant temple, but on my first Christmas I found myself with a trestle table and a whitish table cloth in a sports hall in a little town called La Rochefoucauld. The hall was mainly used for the local boys basketball team – I'll leave you to imagine the bare floorboards, the wonky trophy cabinet, the slightly grubby cream/yellow walls and the interesting whiff of young lads, cheap deodorant and damp basketball kit lingering in the air.

Now you know why I am so happy to be here with you this evening rather than celebrating the first Mass of Christmas in a less than pre-possessing parish hall, with the faint whiff of a dodgy French loo, the decorative finesse of a 1970s gymnasium and the ambience of an abandoned railway waiting room. It was all a bit murky.

This service is really very special. We come with high expectations. It needs to be the best we can make it, the first mass of Christmas. Everything should be as wonderful as possible. Given the choice between magic and murky, a beautiful church or a grotty gym what would we choose?

The magic of course!

But let me challenge that.

Today is special – it is our celebration of the incarnation – of God coming into our world – the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us – the story of God’s plan for the salvation of the world finding its starting point. Tonight we join with our Eastern Orthodox fellow Christians in finding the incarnation at the heart of our understanding of God’s love. Every Sunday, every Eucharist we place the death and resurrection of Jesus at the culmination of our worship, but tonight we precede all that with this important fact. That God took on human flesh, to become as we are. We pause before the chaos of tomorrow’s celebration to remember that he chose to become like us that we might become like him. That Mary was prepared to ‘Yes’ so that we might see what God is like in terms that we might understand.

And it was a real incarnation – the Word really did become flesh – the Jesus of our faith and imagination was a real human being – a real baby – it was a real birth. And here is the murky bit, because it turns out to be a bit discomfoting when you think about what that means.

Not so long-ago Tuesday evenings in our house were given over to a TV programme called Baby Boom. Cameras followed the daily routine of life on the maternity ward in a hospital in Marseille. Just to put the record straight, it was Val my wife who was addicted, not me! There was a lot of screaming, a great deal of fear and anxiety, loads of tears, not a little pain and a lot of love.

I guess the same was true 2,000 years ago.

For fun I Googled ‘What did Mary use for nappies?’ I got 15,400,000 responses in .4 of a second. I got a lot of opinion, quite a lot of abusive posts and nothing of any relevance. But behind the silly question is the hard fact that we believe, as we shall declare in a minute, he *became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was made a*

new born baby. As Christina Rossetti reminds us in her carol 'In the bleak mid-winter' all he had was a breast full of milk and a manger full of hay.

But what goes in eventually comes out. There is in the story a mixture of the magic and the murky (or at least mucky!)

A garden centre has installed a donkey for the last couple of weeks. On our Christmas cards at home donkeys are outnumbered by camels, robins and penguins. It was never easy being a donkey, but donkeys are still immortalised by thousands of school children trying to find the right note for 'Little donkey, little donkey on the dusty road'.

The garden centre donkey is the proprietor's attempt to add a little Christmas magic, but here come the murky bit; donkey comes with a strict notice that says 'Do not touch. This donkey bites!'

This realism, this rooting the Christmas story in the real world is so important.

In a week's time we will tip over into a new year. It will bring the usual mix of the magic and the murky. With 2024 will come good news; some of the things we fear will not come to pass. But there will be the sudden unforeseen blow of tragedy. There will be surprises that sweep us off our feet with joy, or grief, there will be events long dreaded that find their grim fulfilment or, perhaps, they will evaporate like the morning mist over the river Trent.

Today we remember that Jesus becomes part of that; not just acting, not just pretending, not protected from its reality but experiencing life as we do. The incarnation starts with God being totally helpless, completely at the mercy of events he cannot control, completely dependent on others; a very real part of our very real world, bits of it magic but bits of it murky.

Tonight's service will find its climax when Fr. Wayne celebrates the eucharist for us. What we receive in this sacrament, bread and wine, is very much from the real stuff of this world. But in it we meet with Jesus, the saviour of the world who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven. And here in this sacrament we begin to glimpse the heart of Christmas, ordinary people like you and me, who can be touched by God's magic in the very real murkiness of this world.