

Friday 24 December 2021

Midnight Mass



Sermon © Revd Dr Paul Monk

We're here tonight to celebrate a beginning because, in a sense, waiting for a time of worship is similar to waiting for a birth. It's obvious that something is imminent. We're waiting for an encounter. And tonight's encounter, in worship, is with a new-born baby.

It feels like the world has stopped. There is no sound but the expectancy of waiting for the Christ child. Hush. Beauty. Glitter. And, as we assemble in the hushed beauty of a glittering Church, we await the start of Christmas. Then—suddenly—you sense something is happening. Maybe it's the sound of someone singing or a note of music. It might be almost inaudible—a rustle of papers or maybe a door closing. Something. But you know it's begun.

To start, then. The Virgin Mary was waiting for a beginning. She knew the birth of Jesus was imminent. She may not have known what to expect when the birth-pangs started because the Bible is clear that Jesus was her first born. It was beginning. A local lady would have been on hand to help, to talk her through, and just 'be there'. I bet Mary wanted her mum to be with her instead, or maybe a sister

if she had one. Anyway, suddenly there was a new-born baby in the world. Our Lord and Saviour was lying in a manger, vulnerable, weak, maybe sleeping. But for sure, it had all begun.

Our Gospel reading a moment also says that the world did not know him. The few souls gathered round Jesus' crib would have seen a baby rather than the Saviour of the World. For a certainty, they would not have nodded to each other, mouthing the words, 'That's God incarnate lying there!' They didn't. As it says, 'The world knew him not.' It may have begun but they did not know what it was that was beginning.

The few gathered around the manger also had no idea what to expect later. The Gospels are clear that even Mary, who (remember) had spoken with an Archangel, understood very little. Even those who, in later years, discerned a future Messiah failed to understand a thing about what that Messiah would be like. They too knew him not. They did not know that Jesus came to bring about a revolution powered by love of neighbour and love of God. He was a peace-monger, a love-broker, a God pointer. This Messiah was to be an over-turner of both money-lenders' tables but he also an over-turner of the entire social order ... everything. It really had begun.

As Jesus grew, that work of over-turning began in earnest. To that end, he surrounded himself with a gang of outsiders, no-hopers. For example, one of his apostles was a tax collector, a collaborator. One was essentially a terrorist. As he collected together this collection of need, he loved each of their souls into existence. He began to teach them about God—not just those who thought they knew about God as a head exercise but those who needed God and knew it. He began to teach them by example as well as by words. The baby in Bethlehem's manger had grown, in body, mind ... and in spirit. He was now no longer beginning but was now well under way with miracles, demonstrations of spiritual power, and radical new teaching.

It was then that his disciples began to understand what this whole 'Jesus thing' was about. It's all contained in the prophecy from the prophet Jeremiah we heard a moment ago (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Jeremiah wrote it hundreds of years before Jesus was born: 'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. *No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.*' All of us can know God. Jesus was beginning to show a tangible way of experiencing an intangible God.

Like so many people, I struggle to know God. He seems so far away, so *other*. For that reason, God sent Jesus into the world, into my life, as a worked example. And into yours. We ask questions like, 'What should I do about this? What does God want me to do about that?' We don't know because it's difficult. But now we can ask the different question, 'What would Jesus do?' We merely need to watch, analyse, the way that the love of God living in Jesus compelled him to act and then we need to do the same.

It all began two thousand years ago and it's continuing today. Before Jesus was an age of uncertainty and maybe fear—*who IS this God?* Jesus kickstarted our new age, the Emmanuel age, the 'God is with us' age had begun. Forget Tudors then Stuarts from history in school. All we need to remember now is BC and AD with the birth of Jesus as the pivot about which the whole of history changed: BC = **B**efore the **C**omfort of knowing God; AD, **A**fter the **D**arkness of not knowing. Jesus (remember the babe in the manger?) was—and *is*—God incarnate, God in human flesh. He came to earth for us. The spiritual revolution had begun.