

Midnight Mass 2017

Fr Peter Groves

Robert Shallow is a Shakespearean character who lives up to his name. A local official of the court, he is an old friend of Sir John Falstaff, and when he first appears, in Henry IV part 2, he is quick to tell those listening about the excesses of youth which he and the now fat knight enjoyed when they were younger, when Falstaff was a page and Shallow was a student of the law. The memory is misty eyed. Shallow, a parody of justice and authority, has unwittingly reconstructed his youth in his mind's eye. As far as he is concerned, he was the talk of the town, a drinker beyond excess, and the relentless patron of only the highest class of ladies of the night. When the opportunity presents itself, Falstaff turns to the audience and tells them in no uncertain terms just how far from the truth Justice Shallow's memories really are. But in the presence of others he humours the old man with the throwaway remark "We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow".

“We have heard the chimes at midnight.” Falstaff backs up Shallow’s tales of extremity and debauchery with one of those memorable Shakespearean phrases which today requires a leap of imagination. The word midnight belongs in a time when day and night were ruled by darkness and light, and the middle of the night was the time between retiring sometime after six in the evening, and rising some time before six in the morning. To be up at midnight was, for Falstaff and Shallow, a sign of their reckless youth – only the young wild and free would have been awake around midnight itself. For us, it is very different. For us, midnight is not the middle so much as the beginning of the night, and working adults who are asleep before midnight will doubtless count themselves lucky.

What has changed is artificial lighting, something which has been much on our minds in this church as we have seen the installation of new lighting, one which would allow me, were I so inclined, to brighten or dim your current perspective by swiping my finger across an iPad. Power over light is something we now take for granted. We are no longer ruled by the sun.

We control night and day, we decide when it begins and ends. We press a switch, flood the darkness with light, and carry on with gay abandon until our legs or our livers finally give up.

It is not enough for us simply to be illuminated, however, because light can be a dangerous thing. We need to decide where and when the light is going to shine, we need to be sure that an unwanted, unexpected light isn't going to come and flood into those corners of our lives that we are determined to keep in darkness. If I have my finger on the switch, then I am in control. If someone else is positioning the floodlights and plugging in the cable, then who knows what will be seen when the power is turned on. The midnight which Justice Shallow recalls with such nostalgia is the midnight which has obscured the excesses of his youth and allowed him to refashion them, in his memory, with such a rosy glow. When his and Falstaff's dealings with their fellow man are brought to light, we see just how shallow and just how false both actually are.

God comes to us in darkness. We call this a night-time celebration, but we flood midnight with light, we celebrate God's coming by lighting up our churches, our houses, our towns and cities. But whose light is it? Luke's gospel tells us that when Jesus was born he was found in an animal trough, not paraded for all to see. Luke's gospel tells us that the people chosen to receive the news were not the great and the good but those on the outside, those whose untouchable job it was to take turns watching over their sheep outside the city and in the middle of the night. Theirs was real darkness – the lack of any light at all, except perhaps a tiny fire which they used in their struggles to keep warm. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. When we portray this moment we tend to make it comfortable, a gentle flood illuminating a picturesque scene. But Luke tells us one thing and one thing only about the shepherds' reaction: they were terrified.

I suspect that you and I are also somehow terrified by all of this. Terrified by midnight, and terrified by darkness, so that we exert our control over it and

refuse to allow its existence. Midnight is no longer really midnight and we have nothing to worry about. But, however we delude ourselves, our lights remain artificial, and our dark corners remain dark. In that darkness we stow away our fears and our insecurities, the self-pity that no-one else understands, the self-loathing that no-one else suspects, the self-harming inner life that is ultimately afraid to embrace and to love that which we can't control or comprehend. And so we shine our lights elsewhere, illuminate the other things, the safe things, the bold public face of success and wealth and prosperity and hope against hope that no-one will ask us to shine the light any further or to light up those dark and forgotten places.

But the problem for us is that God comes to us in darkness. In the silence of a pitch black night God slips unseen, unheard into our world and into our lives. Despite all our efforts to illuminate midnight, to shine our lights and control what everybody can see, God comes to us on the margins, on the fringe, in those dark corners that we wish to avoid, shining his light into those parts of our lives that we pretend are not

really there. And there is nothing artificial about God's light. It is real, and it transforms, so that once our frightened and failing selves are shown up for what they are nothing can ever be the same. God's light is the light of revelation, it shows us not just God with us in Jesus Christ, it shows us ourselves, our true selves, in all their embarrassing glory.

No wonder we are terrified. Imagine the truth about ourselves being shown to all the world. What could be more frightening? But the angel's words are: do not be afraid. The light of Christ will not just illuminate our dark places, it will banish them once and for all, it will take the things hidden in darkness and put every one of them in the darkest places of all – it will fix them to a cross against a sky bereft of light, it will wall them up in a grave of rock, in the chill of pitch black night. It will shut them away in darkness, seal them in a stone cold tomb. And when light floods that tomb, we will finally see the truth: that there is actually nothing there at all.