

Midnight Mass 2020

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Preachers should be careful what they say. The great Victorian poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins is a former parishioner of ours since he was a student at Balliol, and when he was ministering as a catholic parish priest in Liverpool in 1880 he observed in a sermon that God “takes more interest in a lover’s sweetheart than the lover” does. His Jesuit superiors, horrified by the use of the irreverent word sweetheart, stood him down from preaching duties for a month and insisted that all future sermons were vetted. I’m not Hopkins, but when I was a curate in Essex I dared a colloquialism during a sermon recollection, and used the phrase “I thought to myself, stuff that”. Afterwards I was told by a retired lady that that wasn’t the sort of language generally used in Leigh-on-Sea. I think she and I probably frequented different pubs.

I give you these examples by way of an apology in advance, because I'd like to use another phrase inappropriate to the pulpit. In dark times such as these, we all need a little inspiration, and what or who could be more inspiring than one of the greatest prophetic voices of the twentieth century, that doyen of the hospitality business, Mr Basil Fawlty? Confronted by his wife's insistence that he must get rid of Manuel's pet rat, and her instruction not to let it loose in the garden or it will come back into the house, Basil muses "Can't we get you on Mastermind, Sybil? Next contestant, Sybil Fawlty from Torquay, special subject, the bleeding obvious."

You might think that the bleeding obvious is the last thing we need to think about at Midnight Mass. Not least because, presumably, it's obvious. We don't need to be told. But as I have listened to and read the Christmas wisdom of some of my fellow clergy – especially those wearing purple – I have been left wondering whether it's exactly the bleeding obvious

that we are missing. Of course, everyone is right to observe that we celebrate this Christmas in peculiarly dark times. Doubtless many of us here tonight were looking forward to seeing loved ones tomorrow, only to have that prospect removed by the latest restrictions. Doubtless everyone here knows people horribly affected by the events of the last ten months. Doubtless all of us are hoping and praying that 2021 will bring gradual comfort and relief, and something like a return to normality, whatever that means.

That much is obvious, and no-one seems to have missed it. But where the church is so ready to go wrong, is in its next step. The line is something like this: “In spite of all this darkness, Christmas brings us hope.” And there’s the problem. “In spite of all this darkness, Christmas brings us hope”. No. Wrong. Quite wrong, spectacularly wrong, in fact, for people who are supposed to speak to and for the Christian church. You see Christmas does not bring us hope in spite of all the darkness. Christmas brings us hope

because of all the darkness, precisely because of the darkness and not in spite of it. That much, it seems to me, ought to be obvious.

But it clearly isn't, at least not to those supposed to know. Were they here, we could invite them to think again about what Christmas means, to reflect on the ridiculous assertion that the salvation of the world is personified in the weakest and most vulnerable form which humanity can take. The assertion that God comes among us in the utter vulnerability of the newborn, in the total dependence of a baby hours old, screaming for the sustenance it needs. The Christian proclamation is not that this baby will be our hope because of what he will become. The Christian proclamation is that this baby is our hope because of what he is – the maker all things incarnate in absolute human helplessness. This baby is our hope because this baby is God. Not a part of God, not a bit like God, not a nice image of God, not a symbol of what God might be. This baby – a baby who will quickly die if

left to himself – this baby is what God means because this baby is what God is.

Our hope, in other words, rests upon human helplessness. It is at the point of our greatest weakness, in the most precarious moment of human life, that God takes our part and joins his life to ours. And of course, that should be obvious, because it is obvious to us that a newborn is utterly vulnerable, it is obvious that to call a baby divine is as absurd as anything we can imagine. But there we have hit on the problem: we are limited in and by our imagination, we are convinced that God is somewhere else, something else, something powerful and strong on our terms, something like a superhero, someone to whom weakness, helplessness, can never apply. And so we miss the obvious, even as it lies in front of us crying for the help that we can bring.

The hope which is God's gift in Christ this Christmas time does not stand in opposition to the trials and the terrors that this year has brought and will continue to

bring. God is not among us as demi-God in disguise, ready to magic away the reality and the danger of human physicality. God's embrace of human limitation, God's grasping our life to himself in its weakest possible form is the only hope we have. But it is also the greatest hope we can possibly imagine because at this point of infinite vulnerability there is also infinite possibility. At this moment of beginnings, the content of hope is at its fullest, the life of this helpless child is nothing but future, nothing but potential, nothing but the infinite promise of infinite love for the world he came to save. God's solidarity with our most fearful existence is entirely the hope of the world's salvation. Not in spite of fear and weakness, but precisely because of weakness and fear.

That much should be obvious. And alas, it never is. We are too determined to restrict God, lest he threaten our cosy self-regard. Praise be, then, that God does not leave it at that. The possibility which is this child must become an actuality. All too aware of our

determination to miss what should be obvious, God confronts us over and again in vulnerability, lives out the life of love which perfects itself in passivity, which transforms our power by its weakness, which confounds our wisdom by its folly. The love of God cannot leave us in darkness, won't allow our eyes and our minds to stay closed. The love of God must, can only be poured out, fully spent for all to see. The love of God will be obvious. And it will be obvious when it is bleeding.