



Homily for Midnight Mass

Christmas Eve 2018

St. David's Cathedral, Cardiff

Archbishop George Stack

I read it in the newspaper so it must be true! I quote: *“Christmas is now ‘cancelled’ according to some users who have never been so disappointed in all their life”*. Yet another quote: *“What have we done for you to hate us so much?”*. Incredible, but absolutely true according to the newspaper. What is the cause of this devastation which seems to have ruined the lives of so many suffering victims? The newspaper report goes on to report: *“People have been outraged after discovering that the chocolate behind doors of their Advent calendar was nothing more than a miniature Bounty Bar on day one and, to add insult to injury, a Snickers Bar sweet on day two”*. The end of civilisation as we know it? I read it in the paper, so it must be true!

Fifty years ago today, the Apollo Eight crew orbited the moon for the first time. As Christmas Eve grew dark, light came from a surprising source. A special broadcast from the moon as the Earth rose. This was the first sighting of such a phenomenon in human history. The following message was heard from the space ship:

“To all people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo Eight has a message they would like to send you. In the beginning God created heaven and earth. God said let there be light and there was light”. A rather different message to that widely reported of Yuri Gagarin, the Russian astronaut in 1961, who was quoted as saying *“I flew into space and I did not find God there”*. I read it in the paper so I thought it was true! In fact,

the words were those of the Russian leader in those days, Nikita Khrushchev. The great Christian writer C.S. Lewis (of the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe fame) put it well when he wrote *"... it was rather like Hamlet going into the attic of his castle in Elsinore and looking for Shakespeare"*.

A friend of mine was a chaplain at a major London hospital. A senior consultant who was an atheist once said to him *"I have done thousands of scans of the innermost parts of the person, but I have never seen a soul"*. The chaplain asked him had he ever done a scan of the human brain. *"Thousands"* he replied. *"Have you ever seen a mind?"* the chaplain asked.

We have all heard the usual debunking reports in the papers and elsewhere of the nativity stories over the last few days. Divinity and Virginity? Stable and Star? What was the life of the shepherds like after their mystical experience and vision? Why conflate the story of the Three Kings story with the Nativity Story for the sake of a compact narrative in the gospel of Matthew? And anyway, it's all a myth after all. (You only have to go to the British Museum to see the real significance of 'myth' in the history of civilisation). But is the language of a Times editorial the same as that of that the "The Mirror" reporting the crisis over the chocolate Advent calendar? Is the language of poetry the same as that of a medical account of the heartbeat of a newly transplanted

organ? Is the language of theology and scripture and faith and prayer the same as that of the Trustees Report introducing the annual accounts or the computer program keeping the business going? Yet all are describing one facet or another of life's longing for itself. In every sphere of life we have to learn and use a different language to experience and explain the meaning and the purpose of everything we do and say – everything we are. There are some things that go deeper than words, that go beyond words. *"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight"* certainly. But not just the hopes and fears which we all carry within us and with which the world is surrounded. Also the experience of what is good and right and loveable and forgivable. On Christmas night we take a deep breath of the transcendence of this holy night.

And is it true, and is it true?

This most tremendous tale of all,

Seen in a stained glass window's hue,

A baby in an ox's stall?

The maker of the star and sea

Become a child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is...

No love that in a family dwells
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple shaking bells
Can with this single truth compare.
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in Bread and Wine.

We believe it is true. That is the reason we are gathered here
tonight.
