

Midnight Mass 2018

My mother was Mrs Christmas. I don't mean that my dad is Father Christmas or that they met under the mistletoe, but Mum loved Christmas and went completely over the top every year. I think it was because my parents come from ordinary working class backgrounds where money was tight, and so making it in the world just a bit, meant that Christmas could go with a bang. Whilst my Dad still rejoices in telling us every year that all he would get in his stocking was an orange and a lump of coal for the fire, Mum would shower us with presents so that you couldn't see what you'd got for all the used wrapping paper covering the lounge floor. And when that was over, there was one more gift, allegedly from the Christmas Tree, just to make sure everyone felt thoroughly spoilt.

It would begin in August, with Mum ringing everyone up individually asking what we wanted for Christmas, and her relentless crusade to get everything done meant that she would make weekly calls until you gave in and named something she could go out and buy. Shopping was so much more labour intensive before the internet, and Mum revelled in it. Mother Christmas would always hand over every gift with the immortal loving words of, 'I've kept the receipt' just in case it didn't fit. There was real meaning in all of this generosity, but it did often feel as if Christmas had been made for Mum rather than for anyone else.

Mum died in April, after a long illness with cancer. She fought bravely, enjoying three Christmases after her diagnosis, the last one here at home with us, as it always was. This will be the first Christmas for us without parents around the table on Christmas Day for over twenty years. This Christmas feels a bit different.

Christmas can be a sea of endless carols and services for someone like me, but this Christmas, because it does feel different, this Christmas has held a greater significance. Bereavement is something which sits with people at Christmas more painfully, as we miss the one no longer here around the table. Christmas can be a lonely time for many. But for me this year, all those services have meant even more, as the depth and richness of the meaning of Christmas has

come to me in a new way. What we could so easily take for granted because of Mother Christmas, has been replaced by a deeper understanding of what God did for us in the birth of his son, the most generous gift in eternity. The giving of gifts is one thing, the giving of self, even the giving of self for sacrifice, is quite another. At Christmas we see the true nature of God who comes down and is born among us as one of us, the ultimate sharing of himself, so that we can have faith in a God who knows what it is to be human, knows what it feels like to be you and me, and is therefore real not just at Christmas but every day - for his love is with us every day.

It is into this this animal shed of mess and smells and poverty that Jesus is born, and it is in our messed up world that the Saviour lives. The Times newspaper on Christmas Eve said this; *'In times of stress and turbulence, people return to ancient verities and symbols of stability and continuity. This was true when just a few weeks after the end of World War One, the first carols from Kings Cambridge were broadcast. It is true today, when voters are perturbed and angry about the confused vision for Britain's destiny and identity'*. The Times says; *'Seldom has the essential message of faith seemed more central or had more resonance for the peoples and different creeds of this country than it does today'*.

We live in uncertain times. In such times we need to remember what we take for granted. Having faith in God who has faith in us, is a gift worth having every day.

'And the Word became flesh and loved among us, and we have seen his glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth'.

Happy Christmas everyone.

Stephen Lake, Dean of Gloucester