

SERMON FOR MIDNIGHT MASS

24.12.09

I don't know how you feel but it gives me quite a kick to think that literally millions of people will be in Church tonight for Midnight Mass. Of all the services in the year, it is 'the Midnight' that somehow captures people's imaginations: kids plead with their parents that they are old enough to go; young adults make the supreme effort to get there (sometimes after a few drinks); parish choirs will rehearse the Arthur Warrell version of 'We wish you a merry Christmas' to sing at the end - and the clergy, well, the world over, they have been scratching their heads for some days, trying to find a way of making the wonderful story of Christmas come alive in a new way for today.

Which is not a million miles away from what happened in the tiny Austrian village of Oberndorf in Austria in 1816 when the curate, Fr Joseph Mohr, sat down some time before Christmas, to write a poem that he could use for Midnight Mass that year. We know his poem, as Silent Night of course, and not only have we sung it most years, we have also heard the improbable story about how mice were supposed to have eaten the leather bellows of the village organ so the priest had had to find something new to sing – using just voices and his own guitar.

The truth is much simpler, Fr Mohr simply wanted something to express something new about Christmas and he was lucky that his organist, Franz Gruber, was able to write a catchy tune to go along with his words: *Silent Night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright...* The rest, as they say, is history.

So if we were trying to write something for tonight's Mass, what would we write?

I can't say that I am great student of current pop music – a few nights in front of X factor hardly count – but my very limited experience would suggest that the days of the slow ballad are largely over, that modern songs tend to be much quicker in tempo and almost frenetic in mood, with quite clever lyrics sung at speed. The days of the slow crooner seems to be over. It may be a huge generalisation, but it feel like the majority of young people haven't the time or the patience for slow songs.

Or for just doing one thing at a time, in fact. We all seem to be doing at least three things simultaneously, and at any moment those three activities are quite likely to be interrupted by a mobile phone message - which then becomes the primary focus of our attention. We can't let the mobile ring, we have to respond. We might miss something...

You can see the paradox as easily as I can; this most popular of services, *Midnight Mass*, is about silence and peace and hope and love while the majority of our lives are spent responding and trying to keep up with the pace of life - and feeling like we are constantly failing and falling behind. How have we allowed this to happen to us?

The antidote to all this busyness is the temptation to want to use our little bits of 'religious' time to run away from the horrid world and all its demands, finding here - among the candlelight - a bit of a refuge, a place to recharge our batteries, a space in which to ignore the Blackberry and the other must-have gadgets that seem so indispensable. We sing *Silent Night* because it takes us back to our uncomplicated days, back to our memories of happy and stress free Christmases when all was calm and all was bright, when the snow was deep and crisp and even - without the motorways getting completely snarled up and Eurostar becoming unworkable.

However, if we take a rather closer look at Joseph Mohr's words to *Silent Night*, we are likely to see that it wasn't escapism that he was wanting to experience. For the shepherds are no less shepherds just because of what they saw at Christmas and Mary is no less a young virgin: the realities of their existences were tough, just like many of ours are.

So I want to suggest that what this little poem is really trying to remind us of is that although it is into a pretty hard and very real world that Jesus comes, he arrives with such a aura (to use the word Fiona focused on at the Crib service earlier tonight), such a powerful sense of the love of God - such a sense that nothing is impossible with God - that all the busyness, all the cynicism, all the wretched petty mindedness that can so easily dominate our lives, is simply blown out of the water. Jesus brings a new realism with him: God's glory means we can face the real world with a religion that can handle all the difficulties.

And that should be a real encouragement as we face together whatever 2010 has to offer. Just because we can't go back to a world of 'silent nights' doesn't mean this carol has lost its message. No,

what this poem wants us to grasp is not about *Silent Nights* but about the words: *Son of God, love's pure light*.

You see what I think Joseph Mohr was teaching us, all those years ago, was that in order to experience *love's pure light*, our usual bits of religious experience (on Sundays or whenever) has to be even more hard nosed and earthed in God's requirement to be sacrificial in our giving of ourselves, completely pure and honest in our dealings with each other, and genuinely open to those mind-blowing experiences which come when we are filled with God's overwhelming, pure, light.

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What would we write if we were to produce a carol for today? I don't think I would know where to start. But I think this famous little carol – *Silent Night* – still stands up, not as a piece of harmless nostalgia but as the basis for a good new year's resolution: to accept the *glory of God, streaming from heaven afar* as the words say. What a difference that would make: God's glory, God's optimism, God's reconciling power shining through - affecting everything we think and say, who we spend time with... Just imagine if we could use that title 'Emmanuel' – God is with us – not just as some churchy phrase but as the litmus paper for our actions, just like the WWJD wristband which constantly reminds us to ask, asks: *what would Jesus do?*

And in case we think this message is all too fanciful, perhaps we shouldn't forget that this little carol was not written for publication by someone well known. It was just a little effort, one Christmas, in a tiny parish in a far off country, in 1816.

And I suspect that the reason it has worked for millions ever since is not because it is just a pretty little song, but because it touches a raw nerve: Jesus came into our messy and hard world so that we are able to see for ourselves *love's pure light*. Of course we can resist all this; or we can welcome the fact that *God's glories do stream from heavens afar*, even into our lives, if only we will recognise them when they come. So we go on singing: *Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light; radiant beams thy holy face, with the dawn of saving grace. Jesus, Lord, at thy birth...* As the angel almost said to Mary: with God's pure light at work, anything is possible!