

Midnight Eucharist 2013

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 stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissueed fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

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 to-day in Bread and Wine.

The conclusion of the well-known Christmas poem of that very English and Anglican poet, John Betjeman. Those final two lines remind me of why this service, the Midnight Mass or Eucharist is so central to what Christmas is all about. The great and mighty wonder of the Incarnation, God stooping down to become one of us, one with us, over 2000 years ago, more than 2000 miles away, becomes real to us in another great wonder as God here and now comes among us, transforming bread and wine into the very presence of Christ among us. It's an extraordinary claim, too extraordinary to be believed without questioning: 'and is it true, this most tremendous tale of all?' Is it true?

Someone who has helped me to think about that is a very different poet, from an adjacent but religiously very different part of the world, Ireland. Seamus Heaney was the foremost Irish poet of the last half century. He died a few months ago at the end of August. I was privileged to shake his hand just a month before he died. He didn't know who I was; he was just departing from a conference he'd been addressing which my wife was attending and I was just standing at the door with the children waiting for her to come out and the great man passed me. I recognised him immediately: that shock of white hair, the well-proportioned ears, the glasses on the end of his nose and that gracious smile. And there was he greeting me as though I was somebody who mattered. They say Nelson Mandela was like that, don't they? He greeted people as if they mattered – which, of course, to him – and to God – they did.

Heaney was a cradle Catholic; he grew up in a small thatched house in County Derry, 'immersed', as one commentator put it, 'in the calendar of the farming year and the rituals of rural Catholic life'.

'Like everybody else', he wrote himself, 'I bowed my head / during the consecration of the bread and wine,/ believing (whatever it means) that a change occurred.'

But as he grew up he slipped away from Catholic observance and became a poet primarily of nature and the world of the every day. He moved from his somewhat narrow upbringing on what he described as 'a journey into the wideness of the world'. It wasn't that he particularly rejected the idea of the next world; more that he saw so many marvels in this one. His desk became the altar, his poetry was his prayer; the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation not eschewed but widened, the whole world becoming a sacrament, the simple elements and things of life reverently received and in them the sacred discerned. And so he was still bled to write in one of his later poems:

'I cannot / disavow words like 'thanksgiving' or 'host' / or 'Communion bread'. They have an undying / tremor and draw, like well water far down.'

Perhaps Heaney grew away from the institutional version of his childhood faith because of some of the ways religion divided people rather than brought them together. In his acceptance speech when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 he recalled an episode in 1976 when a minibus full of workers was held up by armed and masked men and the occupants were ordered out of the van and lined up at the side of the road:

Then one of the masked executioners said to them, "Any Catholics among you, step out here". As it happened, this particular group, with one exception, were all Protestants, so the presumption must have been that the masked men were Protestant paramilitaries about to carry out a tit-for-tat sectarian killing of the Catholic as the odd man out, the one who would have been presumed to be in sympathy with the IRA and all its actions. It was a terrible moment for him, caught between dread and witness, but he did make a motion to step forward. Then, the story goes, in that split second of decision, and in the relative cover of the winter evening darkness, he felt the hand of the Protestant worker next to him take his hand and squeeze it in a signal that said no, don't move, we'll not betray you, nobody need know what faith or party you belong to. All in vain, however, for the man stepped out of the line; but instead of finding a gun at his temple, he was thrown backward and away as the gunmen opened fire on those remaining in the line, for these were not Protestant terrorists, but members, presumably, of the Provisional IRA.

A dreadful story but not wholly awful – for in the midst of it was the hint of a better way, a kinder humanity – all in the squeeze of a hand. That better way was the one chosen and lived out in his final decades by Nelson Mandela. South Africa and Ireland shine out as examples of what can be done when the Christian virtues of Hope, Forgiveness and Longsuffering and given room to detoxify the poisons of prejudice, fear and revenge.

A year and less than an hour ago Alan Greaves set out to his local church of St Saviour's, near Sheffield to play the organ for the Midnight Mass. He was attacked by two 22 year old men who brutally and repeatedly beat him about the head and left him with injuries from which he would never recover. He died a few days later. His wife and family, friends and fellow parishioners are now celebrating the Midnight service a year on after which they are going to go the place where Alan was attacked. His widow Maureen said this:

'We will remember Alan for a moment... then we will all light candles and surely remember that the light of Christ really does overcome evil, which is what we believe. We believe ... that Christmas leads into Easter; and so we truly do believe that God will overcome the darkness, especially if we allow it, and pray for it.'

Mrs Greaves consciously decided to forgive her husband's attackers; she will be praying for them over this season.

Another example of the power of forgiveness to transform our disfigured world. It is why Christ came, it is why he lived and why he died – to bring forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. His life brought a touch of the divine into our world, God made visible, God made present. 2000 years ago, 2000 miles away, but he still he comes and makes himself known where the stranger is welcomed, the hungry fed, the prisoner visited. And still he comes where two or three are gathered in his name, when we pray 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us', and when we take bread and wine and remember the great sacrifice he made for the sins of the world.

God was Man in Palestine

And lives to-day in Bread and Wine.