

HOMILY FOR CHRISTMAS NIGHT
25 DECEMBER 2018

Thank you to all of you for joining us for this Mass of the night of Christmas. On behalf of Fr Abbot and all the community I pray for blessings upon you, your families and your friends and this evening for a joyful and holy celebration of the birth of Our Redeemer, the Holy Child born for us tonight.

Tonight's readings for the Mass of Christmas, contain some familiar and rightly well-loved images. In Isaiah we have the people that walked in darkness who see a great light, the promise of a child who is born for us with the titles 'Wonder-Cousellor, Mighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace.

In the letter of St Paul to Titus, we are told of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus, the fulfilment of the promise of the prophet Isaiah. In the Gospel the child born of Mary and laid in a manger, is announced by the angel to shepherds as our Saviour, Christ the Lord, while the glory of God shines round them.

So we celebrate tonight the birth of a Saviour-God, a Saviour who saves us from the darkness of our world, of our lives. We know well enough about this darkness in our national life, in fear of an uncertain future, in our family lives where there can be pain and division as much as love, in our Church and in this monastic community, which has been so sorely afflicted by scandal. All of this can be so acidly corrosive of faith.

So it may be in some real desperation that we look out for, and seek, a light to guide us, we search for a Saviour, who can purify us, we seek a God who will be a Love in us, a power of healing love. The measure of our desperate need, acknowledged, owned, will be the measure of our ability really to enter into the truth that in the Christmas story we do truly find a Saviour, we do truly find our God.

A key word that recurs in our readings and in the Christmas story is the little word 'joy'. It is there in Isaiah 'you have made their gladness greater, you have made their joy increase'. It is there in the responsorial psalm, Psalm 95 'all the trees of the wood shout for joy, at the presence of the Lord, for he comes'. It is there in the Gospel. When the angel appears to the shepherds and the glory of the Lord shines round them, they are understandably terrified, but the angel says 'Do not be afraid, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people'.

What is this joy and how may we acquire it? God intends to be found by us and can be found. This is the great good news of Christmas. God really does intend to and can be found. It is possible, against the pain and darkness of our lives and of our world, nevertheless to find and to know joy.

You have chosen to come and celebrate this Mass of Christmas in a monastic Church, to a Church which is prayed in by a monastic community. Now it is not just newspapers that will tell you that monastic communities are not perfect. You can be assured by us that monastic communities are not perfect. We are struggling to be holy and in this struggle we can be our own worst enemies, just as much and maybe sometimes more than you can be. We can have a depressing sense of our own weakness and fragility, our lack of faith and hope and love, just as you can have.

St Paul tells us in the second reading that ‘what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God and all our worldly ambitions’. Monks, like you, struggle to give up everything that does not lead to God and all worldly ambition. We like you struggle, as that reading continues, to be ‘self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world’.

But then none of us, whoever we are, are saved by our own holiness. We are saved by Christ. Only by Christ. This is what we sang in the Gloria at the beginning of Mass, the song of the Christmas angels, which becomes the song of the Church in the Mass: ‘You alone are the holy one, you alone the Lord, you alone are the Most High’. You alone, you alone, you alone. Our sins, when we are ashamed of them, as we are, and when we repent of them, as we do, can bring us yet to Christ, to know him, to experience the joy of his presence.

The same threefold invocation comes before Communion, Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world, Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world, Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world. He is born to be the Lamb of God, who through his death and resurrection will take away our sins. He will have mercy on us and he will grant us peace.

Through your participation in this Mass may you know, may you deepen your awareness, that Jesus is the Holy One, who takes away the sins of the world, who overcomes our darkness and the darkness of the world, who can make us aware of his presence, who can give us his joy and his peace. There are none of God’s promises that cannot be true for you tonight.