

## **The dazzling darkness of Christmas – A Homily for Midnight Mass**

*Isaiah 52.7–10*

*Hebrews 1.1–4*

*John 1.1–14*

*What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

A little boy steps out into the depths of darkness. Brave with purpose, he tugs his parents along. His excitement has got the better of any fears and terrors of the night. At first walking, he starts to run along the dimly lit empty streets of the city. At one point, he stops still. He looks around, taking the full measure of his surroundings, and then reaches out to grab at the darkness. He motions with his arms as if he were wrapping himself in a cloak. He smiles at this inspired moment of self-directed theatre and speeds ahead. Covered in the flowing mantle of darkness, the little one knows what he is looking for. Turning a corner, he jumps with glee. He has arrived at the road where a host of Christmas lights glisten amid windows, trees, doorways, and rooftops. Looking up, he gasps, and points at the waxing moon, twinkling stars, and the dazzling darkness of space. The dark is aglow with wonder. His face lights up, as do those of his parents. A passer-by comes along with her little daughter who, though shy and hiding behind her mothers' legs, can hardly contain her own delight. 'We are

here for the light,' her mother says. Everything flickers with radiant life, though it be dark and cold.

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

We have had more than our fair share of darkness this year – the darkness of disease, disruption, depression and death. A merciless darkness that has struck at the heart of our way of life. A darkness measured out in countless lives and untold suffering, straining healthcare, the credibility of the halls of power, and our sense of reality. From dusk to dawn, and through the shifting tones of every season, this is a darkness that has overshadowed everything. Even when things seemed to get brighter, when vaccines were approved, when we dared to make plans again, to hope again, to think of seeing those we had been separated from, the darkness has struck us down, left us smarting. And as we teeter on the edge of yet more uncertainty, it is tempting to despair. To think that darkness has overcome light. To doubt that the fullness of life will ever be restored. To hand ourselves over to cynicism, conspiracy, selfishness, inhumanity. To let light be extinguished. To love darkness.

*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

It is a tired cliché to say that we treat the Christmas season in an all too sentimental, consumerist, and superficial way. There is nothing wrong per se about tinsel, wrapping paper, roast Turkey, Christmas

trees, mince pies, cartoons and films on repeat. Indeed, the real focus of Christmas for a lot of people remains important – the coming together of families in their joy and sorrows and in reaching out to those for whom Christmas is a source of anguish for this very reason. And, of course, there is much to rejoice about in the way the beauty of the story of the nativity, and the wonder of the baby Jesus, captures imaginations, young and old. But if we simply leave it at that Christmas risks losing its true depth of focus – one that speaks into the very heart of our deepest darkneses.

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us.*

Christmas marks the awesome mystery in which God, who dwells in unapproachable light, who is a deep dazzling darkness we can never comprehend, who calls all things into being, comes into our midst as one of us, in all the vulnerability of our humanity, to break through despair, cynicism, and the powers of darkness. This is the God whom Scripture tells us is light, in whom there is no shadow of darkness, whose very first words in the book of Genesis are ‘let there be light,’ whose light dances in the colour and diversity of the cosmos and dignity of things. In the words of our creed, Christmas celebrates that Jesus is God from God, light from light. And that in him, God is born as one of us and takes on our human nature, including all that is dark.

Like a young boy running out in the streets of a dark city fearless with excitement, the God of Christmas plunges into the depths of our

darkness with outstretched arms. Tugging the divine life with him, he clothes himself in darkness, to search out the glimmers of light that belong to the beauty of creation, the same light that is the very fabric of all things, through which all things are made, the light that is the truth of human beings fully alive. God does not, however, simply make a cloak out of the darkness of night-time. Even in the crib, as a resplendent defenceless baby, the divine puts on the darkness of suffering and pain, of destruction and despair, of the shadow of death. By stooping down to wrap our darkness within the ever-greater depths of the dazzling darkness of the divine light, however, God does not destroy it but transforms it. Here the Word made flesh at Christmas finds its completion at Easter in flesh crucified and risen, when Jesus overcomes the darkness of suffering, death and destruction through love; by dying and rising again to new life in a love poured out for all, shared with all, through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.*

Christmas is God's declaration to us that even the darkest of times have been definitively remade and softened. Even when all seems lost, darkness is never the last word. Because of the One born into the midst of our night, the darkness of suffering is always aglow – shimmering as the costly but creative context in which we too can

clothe ourselves in God's dazzling darkness and respond to suffering out of the light of God's love revealed in Jesus. Christmas is when God reminds us from the heart of darkness, that we are children of light; that human souls and faces are made to be radiant, to light up other faces, to set the world alight with the flame of God's love. That we are here to share the light and flicker with vibrant life, though it be cold, though it be dark.