

Sermon for Midnight mass SJB 2020

Christmas Eve- -the most magical night of the year- -excited children awaiting Santa- -cards written, presents wrapped, food bought and best of all, midnight mass- - - candlelight and carols- -bread and wine ready for us to share in celebration of that miraculous mysterious birth- -God entering our world as a human baby.

But this year we can't escape the masked faces- -no joyful congregational singing - -the worry, the stress and the sheer weariness and heaviness of this dreadful global pandemic that has robbed countless millions of so much that makes life special and beautiful. Of course we must never forget there are always many people for whom Christmas eve is far from magical, many lives darkened by suffering, but tonight the whole world is dark.

This global darkness robs us of many of the normal human interactions that make our daily lives worth living. To a greater or lesser degree it affects us all- -no-one can escape entirely and many have suffered greatly and are still suffering.

It was a dark night too when Jesus, the Saviour of the world was born. It was a dark night when the star appeared in the east. And when the man Jesus ended His life on a cross, there was darkness over the whole earth from the sixth hour until the ninth hour.

But those were the very times when God was at His busiest.

Never feel when the news is bad or when gloom settles over your lives or the future is murky and uncertain that God has abandoned you. Never ! It is in the very darkness that He is to be found, for that is where the light can shine at its brightest.

Darkness is the natural medium for light to shine in. The stars in the heavens are there all the time, but they can only be seen when darkness falls. When all is light a whole range of beauty and splendour is hidden from our sight. I well remember, on a tiny Greek island, marveling at the starlit sky- -soft black velvet sprinkled with sparkling jewels. I have never before or since been so aware of such intense brightness.

The battle between the powers of darkness and light has never ceased since the world began. The question is always, which side are we on? The worst kind of darkness is the darkness of cynicism and despair. Thank God the vaccine has brought us the light of hope in our ongoing battle with the pandemic, but it's not a panacea. As in everything we each

have to take responsibility in the battle, whether a small or a large part. The light of hope shines bright for me in the faces of my grandchildren. In their life and vigour and idealism. I want to support and help them to keep their hopes alight and alive.

It was in the dark before the dawn on the first Easter day that a little band of women came to give the last rites to the battered, crucified body of their dearest friend. They hadn't been allowed to do that on the day he died and now they were creeping along in the dark, consumed by grief and worry. How would they roll away the heavy stone placed over the entrance to the tomb and sealed by the authorities in case anyone should steal the body and start a run of fake news? The darkness of all of that should have crushed them into submission, but the light of their love was so strong that they battled on, in spite of all their terrors. Imagine their total astonishment when they found the stone already rolled back, the grave clothes lying tidily where the body had been. It took sometime for what had really happened to sink in.

Why am I talking about Easter on Christmas Eve? Because Christmas is just the beginning of that wonderful story of light and hope!

Our very surroundings this Christmas eve speak to us of God being here, God being at work, God undaunted by the gloom, God letting His light shine in the darkness.

If we look with the eyes of faith we will notice the starlight in the dark sky- -the starlight of acts of kindness- -compassion- -caring and love. And we will be bearers of that light to others. At a very dark time in my own life when my beloved husband was moving inexorably towards death, a wise friend suggested I might like to keep what she called a book of glimpses- -moments of special awareness when my darkness was lit up. She said I should note them down with the date and when the world seemed especially dark I should revisit what I had written and I would be comforted. One I will always treasure came from a young grandson.

My husband had a strong faith and in the last weeks of his life always held his little holding cross tight. The only time he would let go of it was when the nurse came to wash him. As soon as his hand was washed and dried he immediately reached out to clasp his cross once again. He could no longer speak but when visitors came he would sometimes have the strength to hold the cross up towards them. One day young

James said to me, "When Bampi holds that cross up, it's like he's still telling us to trust in God like he does."

Yes!

We are invited, if we are willing, to celebrate this midnight hour by reaffirming our faith in the God who dwells in the dark, in the Son who came in the dark and in the Holy Spirit who sheds the light and love of God in our hearts, and in the darkness of this world, to bring light in the face of fear and gloom. For some of you that may be difficult, but nevertheless you are either here in church or joining us at home. We can **all** look up and be glad together this Christmas Eve, for the light of love shines on and **nothing** can overcome it.

Whenever life seems dark, remember these words of St Francis of Assisi: "All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of one small candle ".Amen.