

## Homily at Midnight Mass 2021

The Gospel we have heard tonight is one of the most famous stories in the world. In Christian countries, it is probably the most famous story, and for us it is much more than any other story. The Gospel told us when Jesus was born, where it happened, and who was involved in this amazing event. I have not been here very long, but I have a strong impression that there is great respect for the Christian religion among Faroese people, even those that do not believe in Jesus Christ. It used to be like that in my home country, England, but the culture there has changed since I was a boy. Now it is very common to meet young people and children who have no idea why we celebrate Christmas. It could happen here, too. I hope not, but we cannot look very far into the future.

It is very important to hear the story as it has been told for nearly two thousand years. We have just listened to it, but how many of the details can we remember, even a few minutes after hearing it? I want to suggest a way of holding on to what is important in the way Saint Luke's Gospel tells us about the birth of Jesus. I think the best way is to remember who was involved, and to focus on them. The main characters are Joseph, Mary, the shepherds and the angels. Let's just think about them.

Joseph is a silent man, a man who is there in the background. None of the Gospels records a single word he said. He was not dumb, but he was a profoundly thoughtful man. He had unusual dreams, but he acted on them. The task of being the guardian of the Son of God did not paralyse him, because he was a man of action, a man who listened to what he was told, considered what it meant, and took wise and courageous decisions. In this way, he is a marvellous role model for fathers. Our world has plenty of advice for mothers, but there is hardly any guidance for fathers. Joseph is a great guide, particularly in his capacity for reflecting quietly on what God asks of him. This silent, strong man realised what God wanted of him, and did his best to do it.

Mary is also silent in the Gospel we have just heard, but Saint Luke does tell us some of the things she said at other times. She had a conversation with the angel Gabriel, who was sent to tell her she would have a child and be the mother of Jesus, the Son of God. Orthodox Christians call her Θεοτοκος (theotokos), the one who gave birth to God, God's mother. There are two other times Mary spoke. When she and Joseph returned to Jerusalem to find Jesus, who had stayed behind without telling them after the pilgrimage, she scolded him for causing pain to her and to Joseph. And, at the wedding in Cana, she asked Jesus to help the hosts, who had run out of wine, and when Jesus told her it was not the right time, she ignored him and told the organisers to do whatever he told them. This last story has convinced Catholics that Mary's prayers are extremely effective. In tonight's Gospel, we hear nothing of the ordeal of giving birth to her first child, but the fact that she was chosen for this unique task explains why Christians have great respect and affection for her.

Just before Easter in the year Pope Francis was elected, he told Catholic pastors, which meant bishops and priests, that they should smell like their sheep. Some of my friends misunderstood, because they thought the Pope was encouraging us to be able to recognise the smell of the sheep. No, he said we should smell like the sheep. I am sure he was thinking of the shepherds who were in the fields near Bethlehem. They were men who spent weeks and even months with their sheep, day and night, and surely the sheep would rub against them so often that they would smell just like their sheep. Pope Francis was encouraging us to get to know the people entrusted to our care, and to spend time with them. In tonight's story, the shepherds represent people whom society despises, men who stink like sheep, usually uneducated, simple men. The important thing to notice is that these outcasts were the people God chose to be the first witnesses of the birth of Jesus. God is not like us. He chooses people we might ignore, and gives them an important role in the arrival of Jesus among us.

The other people who were present when Jesus was born were the angels. They are not really people, but they are messengers. In fact, the word 'angel' means a message or a messenger. One of them spoke to the shepherds, and told them that their saviour had been born and that they would find him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger in Bethlehem. Then the sky was full of angels who praised God, in the words of the hymn we say or sing every Sunday: "Glory to God in the highest heaven."

I have left out one person, haven't I? I have not mentioned Jesus. Joseph and Mary, the shepherds and the angels were all present at the time when He was born. Joseph and Mary are the ones God chose to look after the baby and bring Him up; the angels announce His birth and praise God, and the shepherds represent the rest of the human race. They represent us. The fact that they were poor and simply men shows that there is something really special about this baby, and that is the important thing in the Christmas story.

What was so special about this baby? The angel of the Lord told the shepherds, "I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today... a saviour has been born for you". I think this is where some people today begin to have problems with the Christmas story. There are many people who simply do not believe they need to be saved. For a few hundred years now, a growing number of people have become convinced that the human race has grown up, and does not need help from anyone, and certainly not from God. Many of us are tempted to see ourselves as so clever that we can solve all the problems we encounter in our lives. I can only speak for myself, when I say that I find hope in what the angels said to the shepherds. I do recognise my limitations and I see that, without help, there is no way I can overcome the obstacles I find in the world around me and even in myself. I do need a saviour. I wonder what your experience has taught you about your own need for a saviour. We can never force anyone to accept that he or she needs to be saved; all we can do is be honest about how we see our own lives.

So, for those who believe they need to be saved, the angels really do bring good news. They yell us where to find the Saviour, and most of all they tell us He has arrived. John's Gospel says it beautifully. "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us". We can say that another way: "God has become one of us, and has come to live in our street". I really believe that, if we listen carefully to what the Gospels tell us about the birth of Jesus, we discover that God is incredibly generous to us; God wants us to be happy; He does not want us to be overcome by problems, by the bad things that can happen to us, or even by sickness. There are times when these things will damage us, because God made us free and made nature free as well. Suffering is built into human nature, and at this time of the year we can find stories of suffering almost unbearable.

That is when it is very important to remember that the baby who was born in Bethlehem did not remain a baby for very long. He became the boy who wanted to speak about God and stayed behind in the Temple in Jerusalem, and worried His parents. He became the carpenter who preached in the synagogue and surprised the people who heard him because He seemed so wise. He became the holy man who had the gift of healing all sorts of diseases and could even cast out evil spirits. He became the teacher, whose ideas unsettled the scribes and the Pharisees, and even the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. He became the one who was executed on a cross; in His suffering, He became close to every person who suffers persecution or pain, so none of us should feel abandoned.

Tonight, we remember how God became one of us. It is such a hard thing to grasp, but if we can believe it, it changes everything - and everyone. It means none of us is separated from God any more, and it means God is part of our lives for ever. God is not a million miles away in heaven, but has set foot on the earth and lived a life not very different from our own.

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