

Midnight Mass 2011 “In her womb Fire resides, in her bosom is a mighty wonder: she grasps this Fire in her fingers, and in her lap she carries the burning Sun: how awesome it is to tell of this!” St Ephrem, *Hymns on Mary, no 4.3*

The genius of the story tonight is that everyone of us has a stake in it: everyone of us has been there, regardless of race, creed, age or situation in life. The story of the birth of Jesus Christ is our story; our story is his. Whatever path our life has taken from the first gulps of air we breathed: we have a shared beginning. The birth of a child, like the other great milestones of our lives, rightly interrupts the passage of everyday events.

Tonight we celebrate the glorious, peace-giving truth that God has interrupted history: in the birth of his son, the Word made flesh, time has been broken in upon by eternity. It is hard to put into words unless you are a poet, which is why St Ephrem is our best friend on this occasion: “...in her lap she carries the burning Sun...”. The One who was before all things, in the bosom of the Father, has been born among us.

He would, like all growing babies, have advertised his advent many weeks before his birth, when his mother, like all mothers, felt those first stirrings, gentle almost imperceptible movements, soon turning to vigorous, even alarming, kicks and bumps. The quickening of the One who will judge the quick and the dead.

A tiny, new-born child is a powerful reminder that each one of us goes through life as an extraordinary cocktail of vulnerability and strength, of independence and need. Seemingly helpless, and yet able to command the attention and efforts of quite a circle of adults: and God has entered into this amazing mixture, he has taken it upon himself, mingled it with the burning fire of his own substance.

For us, of course, the balance shifts, from time to time and situation to situation, until we might get to a stage where once again we are much more dependent that we have been used to being as adults. To be independent, to want to fashion our own path in this world, is, in part, to use the glorious faculties that God has given us: to see what we can *do*, what we can *make* of the raw materials of life. That is what ‘growing-up’ is. And this desire for knowledge, our restless questing, comes from the Garden of Eden, from our first parents. It goes all the way back. The cry of the new-born child is the cry of wonder at the beginning of this mighty

adventure that we call ‘life’; it is also the cry of man’s sorrow, at the realisation of what has been lost, all those years ago.

These contradictions are considerable for any human being: how much more so as we contemplate the Christ, the tiny child whose birth we celebrate tonight? The blazing fire of Ezekiel’s chariot making his first tiny cries in the stable: “It’s a boy!” said the innkeepers girl, as she ran for another blanket. The burning bush, before which Moses removed his shoes, so holy the ground, now resting in a manger, with cattle close by. The warmth and the rich smell of the stable greeting the one through whom all things had been made, without whom was not anything made that was made. He who sits at the right hand of the Father, now placed, bundled, on the throne of Mary’s lap. How can this be?!

This is, very simply, the holy wonder and the holy mystery that we gather to celebrate tonight: the story of God’s mighty, helpless love, the story that reaches far beyond the confines of any Christian Church. And it was just the same at the end of his life: God’s mighty, helpless love for us, shining out on the cross. So many people are touched by this mystery, people who would never call themselves Christian: some of you may be here tonight. You are very welcome indeed: come, and enter in with us: through song, through word, through worship, through sacrament.

Rest assured that none of us finds it easy to explain, even after many years: but we don’t have to explain, to use *words*, because *the Word* was made flesh and dwelt among us. Listen again to the poet: “In her womb Fire resides, in her bosom is a mighty wonder: she grasps this Fire in her fingers, and in her lap she carries the burning Sun: how awesome it is to tell of this!”

Another great philosopher-poet, whose funeral was yesterday, Vaclav Havel, says the same thing in a different way: “it seems man can realize... liberty only if he does not forget the One who endowed him with it”. Tonight we gather to rejoice in that liberty, and to remember once again how it has been gained for us. It was Havel’s faith in the One who grants that liberty that contributed so powerfully to the overthrow of tyranny.

The Word was made flesh precisely because we couldn’t receive him any other way. He came to us as our own, the burning Sun in the lap of Mary, and *then* we could receive him. We couldn’t put God’s Word into our words: so he took our human nature and came and lived here with us, to love us and to show us and to save us.

Whatever mix of sadness and thankfulness we bear tonight, into this holy place: it is met in the purity and brightness of the fire and light of Jesus Christ. Whatever the words of our own particular story, whatever the mix of sorrow and joy, they are caught up into the words of God's story: our word is mingled with his Word, and so our human weakness with the glory of God. May this radiance fill your hearts and give you strength and peace this night and in the year ahead. Amen.