

Midnight Mass Sermon 2021

‘When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem’.

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In a few moments we’ll sing these words from our offertory hymn:

“Warring humankind hears not the love-song which they bring; O hush the noise of mortal strife and hear the angels sing!”

‘Hush the noise of mortal strife and hear the angels sing’.

A theme of all our hymns and carols this evening is silence. In our first hymn, ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’: ‘how silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv’n!’. Our gradual hymn has silence at its heart: ‘Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright’. Our final carol, the silence of a parent trying to gently rock their newborn to sleep.

There is a silence in our Gospel reading too. After the heavenly host erupt into song, the angelic choir leave the shepherds in silence. In this silence the shepherds decide amongst themselves, 'let us go now to Bethlehem'.

This decision hints at the important of silence in the Christian life. Silence enables the Shepherd's decision to go to Bethlehem, it enables them to decide to travel to meet Christ - the encounter from which they return glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

As important as silence is, it's almost harder than ever to find silence in the noise of modern life, especially at Christmas. Tomorrow is a noisy day - the noise of friends and family, of Christmas music, of the Queens speech and Christmas TV, of the popping of corks and the whirring of ovens, the noise of friends and loved ones on Zoom calls or even the noise of our memories of Christmases past which can flood to mind.

Finding space for silence in our lives isn't just getting rid of these noises and distractions.

We're not all called to live in "monastic" silence. Finding space for silence in our lives enables us to hear the voice of God even in the noise and bustle and busyness of everyday life: to 'hush the noise of mortal strife and hear the angels sing'.

Silence enables us to listen. To listen to ourselves, to listen to God, to hear the heavenly song which is being sung at all times if only we had ears to hear, the song which breaks out in our Gospel reading: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace'.

In a few moments time we'll be invited to join in this heavenly song as we sing our holy, holy, holy's We sing or say the sanctus, the 'holy, holy, holy' at each and every eucharist. At each and every Eucharist, when the celebrant invites us to join in this heavenly song, she or he also invites us to a kind of silence.

As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams once said, when we're invited to join

in the heavenly chorus of 'holy, holy, holy' at each Mass it's as if the celebrant is turning to us and saying 'Shh! Be silent. Hear the song which is always being sung around you. Be swept up in the heavenly music which the angels always sing'.

It's hard enough to do this in the quiet of a Eucharist, let alone the busyness of our celebrations or when family or children or work or life are at the forefront of our mind.

Yet if we do, if we can find those spaces for silence in the busyness of life, we are reminded that all of that noise, all of those songs we sing and the stories in which we share are swept up in a bigger story and more universal song: the story of our salvation which we celebrate today, and the song of heaven which shattered the silence of that first Christmas night.

Whether it's morning or evening prayer, five minutes of quiet, or even just that gap between

pouring the gin and waiting for the fizz of tonic to subside as we pour that first drink tomorrow, finding space in our lives to hear this song and be swept up in this story helps us navigate all the stories and all the songs and all the noise which make up our lives.

'And ye, beneath life's crushing load, Whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way With painful steps and slow, look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing. O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!'