

24th December Midnight Mass

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

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

I’m sure lots of us have memories of evenings out where a certain song of Robbie Williams features. It was (or is depending where we still go) usually at the end of a night, and depending on the how the night was going, would inevitably lead to swaying, shout-singing or crying through (I’m not going to try to sing it...) “I’m loving angels instead”.

We might think angels don’t otherwise feature much in our lives. They appear lots in our Christmas story. They announce Jesus’ birth to Mary. They warn Joseph to escape Herod and flee to Egypt. They announce the news of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds and suddenly appear in a great multitude, singing the song we sang at the start of our Mass. Our Gloria. Glory to God in the highest heaven. This sudden appearance and our shared song are clues to what the presence of the angels in the Christmas story reminds us each and every Christmas.

For those of us who are Christians, our worship, especially our Mass, our taking of bread and wine and encountering God through them, reminds us that our worship and the worship of heaven become intermingled at the altar, as we break bread and feed on God so too the angels of God surround us and our in our midst. Our Mass, just as in this Midnight Mass, reminds us of this as we sing the song of the angels at the start of our Masses of celebration, our Gloria. In a few moment, we'll share in another of the angels' song. As we sing 'Holy Holy Holy Lord God of Hosts', we are singing the words in which we read in Scripture the angels are singing around God's throne. Holy Holy Holy Lord God of Hosts Heaven *and* Earth are full of your glory.

When we come to this point in our liturgy, you'll notice that many of us, including Mthr Buki and myself bow - as we bow, we are using our bodies to represent the folded wings of the angels bowing down before the throne of God in heavenly song. The former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams described these 'Holies Holies Holies' at this point in our service, in this Midnight Mass, and in every Mass as an invitation, as a moment to pause and hear what is really going on in heaven and on earth, as if the angels are saying to us 'Shh! Stop! Listen. Hear what's really going on, what's happening all the time around us, what's always the case'.

Our wonderful decorations this year, our angels dancing from heaven to earth are a reminder of this invitation of their heavenly song. To stop. To listen. To hear. To reflect on what's really going on. On what really matters in life. On what we really celebrate this Christmas.

At the start of John's Gospel, there's a wonderful image. Jesus promises to a disciple that he shall see heaven opened and angels of God ascending and descending, just as we see them darting to and from here St Peter's this evening. This promise of Jesus reflects an ancient tradition that the angels, whilst serving close to God's throne, weren't able to see God's glory face to face.

Jesus' promises that this disciple would see angels ascending and descending is because the angels hear that God has become one of us in Jesus. They hear that God has become a human being and so they realise they now finally have a chance to see God face to face. They ascend and descend from God's throne, dart to and fro, to see the face of the one they have longed to see.

Once again, the angels remind of us what is always the case. That if we respond to their song, if we recognise what is always the case, if we stop, listen, pause, hear what's really going on, what is always the case, we too can hear what they hear. In Jesus we too can see what they see.

And no more so than in this Mass, as in every Mass, where our worship gets caught up in angel song and God comes among us in bread and wine, just as he became one of us in Jesus that first Christmas. If we want to hear what they hear and see what they see we know we can come to this place, to this Mass and every Mass, to encounter God in this place in bread and wine and be sent out to encounter him afresh with the song of the angels ringing in our ears.

‘Glory to God in the highest’

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts’

‘Shh! Stop! Listen.’