

Sermon for Christmas 2009 St Mary's Midnight Mass

Christmas is about the presence of God in this world through a baby – Jesus – born 2000 years ago. Lots of people tell me what ‘Christmas is all about’ and I usually know what they mean. So if I really want to say it’s about the presence of God in this world through a baby born 2000 years ago, I usually end up saying ‘Yes.....but’.

Until this week, when I read a magazine article, I’d never thought of Christmas being about guilt*. But if you think about it, there’s a lot of potential for guilt:

Who you’ve sent cards and who you’ve forgotten; is that present worth as much as you’d like it to be? Are you ready for the day? Have you spent too much or not enough, drunk too much or failed to be hospitable, what about the hungry and the homeless, those cut off from their families?

Notice what the guilt is about – Have you DONE – DONE enough to make it a good Christmas? There’s a lot of potential for guilt at Christmas!

But what was the magazine article about? It was about something quite different. It starts really when, two years ago, just after Christmas, a young mother and wife suddenly died at the table from something called Marfan Syndrome. The article is about how the father helps the child, now four, to celebrate Christmas;

“Yesterday on the car radio, a Christmas song came on that included the words ‘mother’, ‘love’, and ‘Christmas Day’ in the first verse. I lunged for the dial, and the next thing we heard was a child singing ‘Daddy, where’s your Dreidel?’ Saved again, this time by a song about a Jewish spinning top. Madeleine cheered and sang along. When she came home from school that day, she asked if we could celebrate Hannukah’ – that’s a Jewish festival – ‘ and I said no because we aren’t Jewish.

“The next morning over breakfast I said ‘Yes, we can celebrate Hannukah’. ‘But we’re not Jews’, she replied. I promised her we’d pick up a Menorah that afternoon.” (A Menorah is the large candlestick used in the Jewish celebration.)

And so he continues (and this is the bit about guilt):

“Hannukah gives a chance to be happy, because it’s something we never did before. **IT’S A CELEBRATION THAT DOESN’T COME AT THE PRICE OF FEELING WE’VE FAILED, LIKE CHRISTMAS DOES.**”

Now, his situation was special; he was looking for something without associations with a past that can never be restored. But the thought of **CHRISTMAS FOR ALL OF US COMING AT A PRICE** is worth holding on to for a while; the price of feeling we’ve failed – Christmas guilt.

We need to pause here and briefly think about Hannukah. It goes back to a time before Jesus when his country was occupied by the Greeks. When there was a rebellion and the Greeks left, the first thing was to restore the temple which had been desecrated by idols. The temple lamp, representing the presence of God, needed to be

lit again in a final act of restoration. The oil used was special and took eight days of preparation. Only one day's supply was found. So, knowing that the restoration would only be temporary, they nonetheless lit the lamp and started preparing the new oil. Miraculously, the lamp burned for the eight days until the new oil was ready.

Hannukah celebrates the act of God whereby his presence was miraculously represented by the lamp. It's a feast of light.

The lamp in the temple has an equivalent in this church – the lamp before the aumbry or tabernacle wherein is the Blessed Sacrament of the Body of Christ – the continued presence of Jesus through whom God became present in this world.

Hannukah and Christmas both celebrate an act of God. Both are about the presence of God. The other faith which looks back to Abraham - Islam - celebrates at about this time the story of how Abraham thought God wanted him to sacrifice his son Isaac and how at the last minute a ram was substituted. Abraham did not need to feel guilty – God provided.

And God was still to provide – his own Son Jesus – in the stable and on the cross: in the stable he is there as and for God; on the cross he is there for us.

Let us not put him back on the cross and above all tonight let us not spoil God's gift by getting guilty about what we've failed to do.

Notice the difference – we get guilty about OUR failures at Christmas because we've lost the wonder and excitement children still have opening presents. We get to feel we've failed when we don't look up and see that it's all about what God does for us.

God's is the gift and it leaves no room for guilt just endless celebration.

Happy Hannukah, Eid Mubarak, AND THE HAPPIEST AND BLESSEDEST OF CHRISTMASSES

* Guardian 18.12.09