



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Christmas 2019 Midnight Mass

The late Queen Mother was able to charm and captivate people throughout her 80 years of public life and service by using just four words: *“Have you come far?”*

Those few very well-chosen words were the key Her Majesty used to unlock a million stories about the lives of those to whom she had addressed the question.

Tonight, we travel to Bethlehem – or at least we do so in word and in song. We go there to see the thing that has come to pass: Mary and Joseph – and the baby lying in a manger.

Some of you will have come far to be here; flying perhaps thousands of miles to join families or friends at Christmastide - or to take a holiday *away from* families and friends who are now safely thousands of miles away! Others will be here tonight in the midst of long journeys of sickness or bereavement.

Our journeys here to St Marylebone, as we visit the manger in Bethlehem, might be geographical, theological, emotional or spiritual . . . indeed all of the above and more besides.

Several, very different, journeys are central to the story of this

holy night:

Mary and Joseph have travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem; shepherds travel from their known world of looking after flocks out in the fields to a manger - summoned by angels; mysterious and exotic astronomer-philosophers will be continuing their journey from distant lands led by the wondrous conjunctions of stars and planets.

And, before the tale of a birth in Bethlehem has been concluded, there will be the long journey of Mary and Joseph and their baby as they seek asylum in Egypt.

Indeed, the very stories we tell and retell at Christmas began their telling as people journeyed around the Roman Empire - long before they came to be written down to provide scripts for countless school nativity plays or kick start the renaissance in art.

Long before people learned how to read or write, the hard-gathered information of this night in Bethlehem was kept fresh and alive so that it could be passed on from one generation to the next.

But tonight is far more than about the telling of a tale, however picturesque; it is about changing the lives of the people who tell the tale and those who hear it.

The shepherds themselves couldn't keep what they had seen or heard to themselves, they had to rush off and tell others.

The wise men, had to share their journey of discover at the court of King Herod.

As people journeyed they talked, and as they talked they exchanged hopes and dreams and fears and, as they exchanged their hopes and dreams and their fears they found not just comfort in telling the story but themselves to be changed in the telling of it.

They discovered that the story they were telling and hearing became their story – as they too heard the song of the angels, saw Jesus to be Emmanuel, the God who takes flesh to live and suffer and die with us so that we can be raised with him to the heights of the Godhead who is and who was and who shall be for ever.

Spiritually, we have been restless travellers since our expulsion from Eden: restless travellers constantly journeying in search of meaning, purpose, rest and home.

Over the 20 centuries of the telling of the tale of this wondrous night, countless millions of men and women, all over the world, have found themselves changed, to have journeyed - and to have come far – to have travelled to the very bounds of eternity.

It was St Augustine who wrote¹ sixteen hundred years ago that God has ‘made us restless’ and that our hearts can be nothing other than restless ‘*until they find their rest in [him]*’.

Tonight, on this most holy night, from wheresoever you have come, howsoever arduous or convoluted your journey have,

may you with the shepherds and the wise men; with Mary and Joseph; with the Magi and the countless millions of men and women who have heard and told and retold the story of Christmas before you, find yourselves changed.

As you come before the manger of Bethlehem may You discover the path that will lead you safely and surely to the heart of divine love which has birthed and sustains the universe; that place of divine love and life, your ‘rest’, your home, the divine welcoming embrace towards which everything that is, or has been, or will be, journeys.

How far we journey measured in physical distance or time is not the point, but how far we have come whilst we journey on is.

“Have you come far?”

“Have you found the way home” . . . through the dark cold and the empty desolation, The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters Of the petrel and the porpoise?ⁱⁱ”

A very happy and blessed Christmas to you all!

ⁱ Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, Book 1, Chapter 1

ⁱⁱ T S Eliot, The Four Quartets, East Coker, V