

St Peter's, Ealing
Monday 24th December
Christmas Eve – Midnight Mass

God of the thin places.

Christmas Eve is one of those times in our calendar when its neither fish nor fowl. We are not quite there; but nearly. A grey area some may say; we are getting there, we are at that in-between time. I'm sure you could recall from your own childhood if not from the stories you have been telling this past few days there are lots of lovely heart-warming children's stories set around Christmas Eve with elves and Santas and lots of generosity and goodness; and you'll find stories of horror and ghosts, with a redemptive twist; like the Grinch. Even in Christian mythology Christmas Eve is a time when the dark side of creation is set loose. It is thought the root of such Christmas ghost stories stems from the tales told on mid-winters eve, when spites and ghouls, goblins and the like we free to roam the earth, looking for the lost and lonely. So you see, ghost stories are a very ancient face of the festival eve.

An example would be Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol'; often seen as a fore runner of the Christmas gothic, in reality Dickens was building on an even older tradition. Families have for centuries gathered around the family hearth before mid-winter feasts to tell stories and share folk lore rooted in this time 'in-between'. Often the theme of these stories was to return the miscreant from their wicked ways and draw them back to the way of righteousness and good; stories of salvation and redemption. Ebenezer Scrooge, visited by a series of ghosts turned from his wicked ways of money and mammon to serve his community and to be a better, fuller person.

Christmas Eve is quite definitely what is often referred to in faith terms, a thin time. A time when the boundaries between heaven and earth are less clearly defined. There is something special or different about this time of the year and about this evening. There are other times in our lives and places we have been that have that 'in-between' character. Somewhere I have been on occasion is The Holy Island of Lindisfarne, just off the Northumbrian Coast. There one can experience a sense of thinness, of being somewhere special or unusual. You can see why the Celtic Fathers under Cuthbert and Aidan established a holy house there and why it has become a place of pilgrimage and prayer.

In-between times in one's life can occur when we are waiting for something; a particular event or special person. I have been at the death bed of a loved one with whom I have travelled through life and there is that time, sometimes that moment, when we know the inevitable is about to happen, the air can change and we know we are in a special place. Sadly, modern portrayal has turned these into horror stories which sell, rather than allowing us to see these as the beautiful times when along with the person who is passing into glory we are permitted the sense of touching something special, of being in the presence of something unique, something peaceful, something comforting and reassuring.

This evening is one of those thin times. We may not be able to label it or name it, but we can sense something special is happening and we are part of it. As we gather with family and friends, or as we take time to reflect on memories, on what is a special night, we can touch heaven, and we can know its reality for ourselves. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Christ child, first we can sense that heaven has come down to earth. The two touch and that ancient division between God and humanity disappears. God now walks upon earth once again, as God did in Eden, offering the promise of his love and forgiveness, asking us to forgive and love in return. If we are unsure of the validity of this Divine promise it is made real for us in the crib in Bethlehem. That is why this evening feels different, special, unusual. Not necessarily something we can put into words, so instead we share in story.

This is a thin time when heaven comes down to earth and earth is heaven, when God becomes human and humanity shares in divinity. In the crib, this scrap of flesh and blood makes real for us the place of the divine in our lives. This thin time is when God touches us and walks along side us in an obvious and open way; the way of Mary and Joseph, in the way of ordinary people in an ordinary world.

At this in-between time, this thin time, we can touch heaven, we can walk with God and we can commit ourselves to live God's way. To walk from today into the ordinary of life with Jesus in our hearts and the Holy Spirit as our guide. As with each year we pray that the Christ child may be born in our hearts today, that we may relish this thin time, touch heaven and be changed for ever.