

Sermon at Midnight Eucharist, 24th December 2025 (Canon J. Shakespeare)

Words from our 2nd reading, Hebrews 1,

‘He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.’

It was an amazing moment, on 15th December 2015, just over 10 years ago, at 11.03 GMT, when Major Tim Peake blasted off from Kazakhstan headed for the international space station, and the start of a six-month mission. And on the same day as our first publicly sponsored British Astronaut made it into space, as if by magic, on the other side of the world, in Los Angeles, the Force Awakened with the premier of the new British-made Star Wars film, to public acclaim. Somehow our love of all things scientific and space-related is insatiable, as new worlds open up for exploration, and there is no doubt a welcome boost for scientific education and the arts.

The search for transcendence – going beyond the normal limits of our knowledge or experience – seems to be built into the very DNA of the human condition. And scenes of Major Tim Peake floating, effortlessly, in his new home aboard the space station, capture our common desire to push the boundaries and find ‘life’ beyond ourselves. Whether it’s through the excitement of travel to exotic new locations, the boundless possibilities of technology and the internet, or the excitement of new research, the avenues open to us seem endless. Never before have human beings had such knowledge or power at their disposal, and (in the western world at least) never before have there been such opportunities for economic growth, leisure or an advanced consumer lifestyle. All offered on the premise of fulfilling our desire for transcendence, the taste of the new, life in all its fullness.

Tonight we stand poised to welcome in the dawn of a new day. We look on with awe as a great mystery unfolds. This Christmas night we pause to reflect on a reality so profound that it has the potential to change our world forever. A mystery, like today’s space age exploration, all about transcendence, about our core desire to find life, but posed in a radically different way. ‘The maker of the stars and sea’ as John Betjeman famously wrote, ‘Become a Child on earth for me’.

So let’s listen again to the story, as the Bible unfolds it to us, and let’s reflect on what it means, in the Gospel of Luke, Ch.2 v.8:

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, * the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’

Christmas dares to proclaim an age-old mystery, at the heart of the universe, revealed to us in scripture, in human life and in the Church, that the ‘word became flesh’. The ‘word’ – that unifying principle of God and of creation, which is life itself – became ‘flesh’ in Jesus Christ, ‘wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And Jesus Christ, foreshadowed by the prophets and born of Mary, is the image of the invisible God who ‘sustains all things by his powerful word.’ He is both word (what the ancient Greeks used to describe as the hidden principle of the universe), and flesh: like you and I.

And this truth, that God himself, the creator of all life, including the stars and galaxies, has come to us in Jesus Christ, turns on an invitation, a possibility within ourselves, that we (as human beings) can discover to be true and real in our experience. For Jesus says, 'Follow me!'

And we do this, we discover such transcendence, not by looking elsewhere for life – into the skies, into the vastness of space, into the boundless world of the internet or research – but within ourselves, where God's word abides, as we dare to follow in his footsteps. In other words in contrast to the desire which locates transcendence somewhere else, faith reveals that God is with us, in our very depths, and as we pray and dare to follow him, we find a whole new world opening up within. 'The maker of the stars and sea become a child on earth for me'.

Jesus Christ, born of Mary, but Christ also alive today and indwelling the hearts of men and women, through his Spirit. And Christ born afresh whenever and wherever we seek to give of ourselves in serving others, in compassionate love and in work for justice, reconciliation and peace.

In the 1960s, at the same time as human beings were planning to land on the moon for the first time, a book was written by a well-known Catholic, the American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, challenging modern people to rediscover their own souls. He wrote this:

'What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery...'

In other words, what is the point of travelling beyond ourselves to discover new worlds if we cannot even face ourselves, our hidden depths and that universe of the spirit which is within?

And he goes on to share some sayings of the earliest Christian monks (the desert fathers) who discovered, at a time when the contemporary world was heading to ruin, the simple joy and blessing of living the Gospel, in prayer and hospitality and great simplicity. For they discovered not only that Christ changed their world, but that in following Him – seeking transcendence within the heart – they were better equipped to love and serve that world, which Christ came to save. They found heaven on earth.

The story of Christmas challenges us to look at our world with fresh eyes and discover a truth deeper than the passing idols of this age: a truth altogether more profound, more universal and more personal. In a word-based culture over-loaded with information, Christmas challenges us to clear the debris of our minds, and glimpse that 'word' at the heart of all life, the 'word made flesh'. God made small in a manger, and within each one of us, and yet God also boundless and infinite: such is the paradox of our faith. Here we are invited not just to look outwards, but to look within, unlocking the light of faith.

And in a culture fascinated by the boundaries possibilities of science, it challenges us to face an altogether more pressing question, what it means to be human. For here we are invited not just to be spectators, but to encounter a living human being, Jesus Christ. Here we are invited to look not to ourselves alone, but (through Christ) to our wider human community and indeed all creation. For in Him alone, our all loving God – word made flesh - is our life, our secure foundation and our peace; in Him is hope for our planet, our human race, this beautiful creation.

So as we reflect on this mystery, where true transcendence lies, let me end with a poem, which helps us glimpse that *topsy turvy* world God is bringing into being, through his Son:

Christmas sets the centre on the edge;
the edge of a town, out-buildings of an inn,
the fringe of empire, far from privilege
and power, on the edge and outer spin
of turning worlds, a margin of small stars
that edge a galaxy itself light years
from some unguessed-at cosmic origin.

Christmas sets the centre at the edge.
And from this day our world is re-aligned;
a tiny seed unfolding in the womb
becomes the source from which we all unfold
and flower into being. We are healed,
the end begins, the tomb becomes a womb,
for now in him all things are re-aligned.

Amen