

Can I just ask you a question. Indulge me, season of good will and all that. It's nothing to worry about I'm sure, but has anybody noticed something a bit weird tonight? Is it just me? I don't mean is it just me who's the weird thing. Let you into a secret, I don't always dress like this. Not unless it's a weekend. So apart from that bloke up the front in the gold nightie, has anybody noticed something a bit odd tonight, something not quite right, slightly off kilter, out of whack, a bit bent, not behaving quite as expected and making a worrying rattling noise.

Shall I give you a clue? No, it might take too long to filter through the sherry haze so I'll just spell it out. This is what's really odd. It's the middle of the night. And you're in church.

Now I know that for many of you, being in church is nothing unusual. For those who've wandered in mistakenly after a skinful at the Plough, Welcome! Funny lot aren't they? Yes, the pews *are* amazingly uncomfortable: they were deliberately designed that way by the Victorians to punish those ungodly thoughts you've just been having. I know all about them. But don't worry, your secrets safe with me. Just keep coming back to church. 9:30, every Sunday and nobody else need ever know.

I know for many of you, this is not a weird time to be awake. On any other night at this time you'll be zinging around, deep in an argument, engrossed in a box set, emptying the dishwasher, finishing the kids' homework, whatever it is you normally do around midnight. Me, I'm almost always fast asleep by this time, so it is possible that I'm actually dreaming all this, which just goes to show how unexciting my life is if my dreams are like this. I just hope this isn't the one where I forget the words and preach a really dull sermon instead. No, that's your nightmare. So, for some this is not a weird time to be awake. For some of you this might even be a time you're normally at work, London famously being the 24 hours city and all that.

Not for me though, as everybody knows the Rector only works on a Sunday morning, the rest of the day and the rest of the week he's catching butterflies, collecting wildflowers and downloading sermons off the internet. I don't do any of those, obviously, apart from the thing about pressing pansies.

Anyway, if you *are* normally up at this hour, and that part is nothing special, unless you possess your own set of keys and let yourselves in without me knowing, we can be pretty confident that you're not usually both up at this hour and in church.

So- be patient, I'm slowly working this out (remember in reality I'm fast asleep right now)- I reckon there must be something important going on. I reason thus, because if there's something really important, you get up early (parents of young children will know this in about four hours time). If it's really important *and* exciting you might just not go to bed at all.

So I guess all of us here tonight, whether we know it or not are both smart *and* excited. We're staying up all night waiting just so we can see it when it happens, just so we can be here, aware, awake (hopefully) when that clock hand hits 12 and just another day turns into Christmas.

For all of us, being here tonight is completely out of the ordinary: at best this is a one day in 365 1/4 event. Which is entirely fitting because we're here tonight stepping outside of our routines to celebrate the most extraordinary, routine-busting, genre-breaking, out of the ordinary, out of the box event in human history: God- the creator of the universe- born as a human being, born in a stable in Bethlehem, as one of us.

On one level, of course, what happened way back then is nothing different at all. For thousands of years before the first Christmas babies were being born every hour of every day, in huts and houses, caravans and caves, plains and stables, wherever you found humans, you found babies.. And in the two thousand years since the star ground to a halt over that stable we've kept on making them, the births have just snowballed. Every minute of every day somebody, somewhere is celebrating a new life, and everybody who ever lived has been present at at least one birth. So on one level, ignoring the angels, shepherds, singing cows and magicians with gifts, what happened way back then is nothing different at all.

But on every other level it's like nothing else that has ever been before or ever will be again. God, born as a human being, the great King of Heaven come down to earth, born a baby, God, with us.

For many new parents, that little bundle of joy they hold in their hands is perfection. Give it a few months of sleepless nights and they might just pause before they assent to that statement, but they will probably still nod in agreement. Mary without doubt, when she held the newborn Jesus in her arms would have thought 'he's perfect'. Of course, she wouldn't be wrong. But not because little Lord Jesus doesn't cry. As if. Not because he's mild and obedient. What does that even mean? He's perfect because he's a child, and all children *are* perfect, because all children are made in

God's image. You. Me. All of us. And because of little Josh now gently rocking in Mary's arms, and only because of him, all children now have the chance to grow into the full potential of what being made in God's image means, all children have a claim on the promises of that first Christmas night, all of us can feel the divine brushing against us and follow in the footsteps of Mary's boy all the way to heaven.

That's getting ahead of ourselves a bit. Let's return to right here right now. Tonight is a bit like New Year's Eve (which you can also spend in St Mary's church: go on, make it a habit. Remember those ungodly thoughts I know about?), but it's every New Year's Eve that ever was and all the rest that are still to come, because tonight you temporarily step outside time. How long have people been saying 'tomorrow never comes'? Well tonight is when the whole world becomes tomorrow. Right here, right now.

If this was just another day then, yes, being here, now, doing this might be, how shall we put this, a bit eccentric. But this is not just another day. This is *the* day from which all other days come, the day that is the centre of time and history, the day from which every day of our lives draw their meaning and purpose.

What a day this is.

Happy Christmas.