

Christmas Sermon Midnight 2003

There is always something captivating about this night. It has a mysterious, even a dreamlike quality and candlelight deepens that sense of the transcendent.

Here in this night, as we gather in expectancy and anticipation, we have a chance to stop and reflect at long last. In the words of the current number one song "When people run in circles it's a very, very mad world," but now you can forget about the running around, if it's not done now it's not going to be, so stop and relax... and in the quiet and the darkness... reflect on what this is really all about. Allow yourself to know that what we do here this night is utterly momentous. All the glitter; all the tinsel; all the rush; all the drink; all the enforced jollity and merriment don't come close to what this is really all about; but tonight we can come close. Tonight we can reach out and touch something of the significance and the weight of this moment, because what this is all about is that God has come close to us.

But is that really what we want? Here am I trying to speak of depth and importance and meaning and yet so much of what we do at Christmas is superficial and plastic and doesn't last beyond Boxing Day.

Well something very interesting has happened this particular Christmas. Of all the superficialities of Christmas one of the most pointless in the scheme of things is the annual frenzy about who is going to have the Christmas number one. Will it be Cliff? It usually is isn't it? Well he was well off the pace this year but the race went right down to the wire and Gary Jules beat the Darkness by a short head.

Those of you who are not pop music aficionados like your Vicar may well be asking, "Who's Gary Jules?" You may well ask. I didn't know either until I watched Top of the Pops last week and there was this bloke in a cloth cap just standing and singing. He wasn't dancing around or bearing his manly chest, or even, playing a guitar he was standing very still and singing; and he was singing something quiet and reflective and thought provoking. "That's not a Christmas number one," said many people. It's not jolly and bouncy and meaningless. No it's not, it's reflective and deep and quite prophetic:

All around me are familiar faces
Worn out places – worn out faces
Bright and early for their daily races
Going nowhere
Their tears are filling up their glasses
No expression
Hide my head I want to drown my sorrow

And I find it kinda funny, I find it kinda sad
The dreams in which I'm dying are the best I've ever had
I find it hard to tell you, I find it hard to take
When people run in circles it's a very very
mad world

It's not Christmassy at all is it? But isn't it interesting that just at this moment, when we're all busting a gut trying desperately to be jolly, the most popular song in the country is one that tells us "it's a mad world." That the best dreams are about dying. Verse two goes on about being ignored, and about being looked right through. You get a sense of him just standing there very still while the whole world rages on around him and he looks and says, "my goodness but it's a mad world."

Well, perhaps he's not far wrong. Perhaps we've made this song number one because we actually recognise very well the madness of it all and yearn for that stillness that the writer and the singer know; that stillness that we find in this night. "When people run in circles it's a very, very mad world."

And what madness we see around us. As always there's been plenty to depress us over the past few months. A war that most of us didn't want and was probably illegal, to get rid of weapons that don't appear to be there. We've proclaimed the value of democracy and the fall of a tyrant and yet we are holding prisoners of war without trial in direct contravention of the law. America is doing it at Guantanamo Bay and we're doing the same thing, though with rather less publicity. Our country must constantly be vigilant for attacks by mad people who seem to want to kill indiscriminately. In Palestine, Israel builds a wall through the middle of people's communities, while young Palestinians blow themselves up in the hope that they'll take a few other people with them, and they're told that will get them into heaven.

Here two children are murdered and because they're pretty little girls in striking red shirts we get blanket media coverage; yet it turns out that it could probably have been prevented if someone had told someone else some information. Earlier in the year a respected scientist was hounded to his death whilst a devout and holy priest was hounded out of being a Bishop because he was gay and because some self appointed arbiters of true Christian morality bullied the Church into giving them their own way.

Here in Bromley the town centre has been heaving with people desperately spending money and shop workers are under increasing pressure to work more and more. Many of the shops will be open on Boxing Day and early in the New Year Parliament will be considering a bill that could allow trading on Christmas Day. Soon there won't even be one day when we are free from the desperate scramble to make money? When people run in circles it's a very, very mad world" I find it quite encouraging that in the midst of all that we're buying a record that challenges it.

And there is still poverty; and there is still much sorrow and there is still AIDS. The darkness of this night can remind us of the darkness of this mad, mad world. Perhaps the maddest thing of all is a Church which has perfectly good electric lights but switches them all off and relies on candles.

But look at those candles. Look at the flickering flames and see how they pierce the darkness and drive it away. Here are signs of hope. Signs of sanity; signs of the true wisdom which is God's and which came into the world on this night.

Amidst all the killing and the lying and the fear; amongst the lack of respect for other people's humanity; amidst our peculiar sense of priorities; our control freakery and our frantic rushing around God still likes us. In fact, he likes us so much that he has come to be with us; part of

our world; part of our life. We are here tonight to rejoice that God values us enough to share with us in spite of all that madness.

The birth of Christ is first and foremost about hope. Hope that the goodness, the truth and the beauty of God; the love and the faithfulness of God really are at the root of everything in his creation.

When we really look at our world it would be very easy to get cynical and maddened and hopeless. It would be very easy to hold up our hands in horror and say "Oh well that's just the way it is." Well we are here tonight to say that that is not the way it is. That madness is a sign of our rejection of God and our rejection of the people we really are; a sign that we have moved away from the people we should be and the God who we should be serving. All that is not the truth about us.

Jesus is a sign of hope for us because he shows us what the truth is and he shows us the truth not by running round in circles; not by bullying; not by fighting evil with its own tools. He shows us truth by lying still in a manger. Later he will show us truth by staying still on a cross. Gary Jules' song said that his best dreams were those in which he was dying. It will be in his dying that Jesus will show us the best truth about ourselves, because his death, like his birth, will be about powerlessness and about giving. We are at our best when we don't try to control and when we don't try to be powerful. When we are still and centred on God and when we give of ourselves. So much of the world's madness is about people wielding power over other people or over their circumstances, but tonight we switch the power off and embrace powerlessness because therein lies a glimpse of the wisdom of God and the hope of his truth.

Well, all this is not new. Quietness and stillness; powerlessness and giving; these are familiar Christian themes; we've all heard about them before, but they remain the only hope of light for the darkness of our mad world. For all their familiarity they remain good news, and if we would make that good news real we'd better make sure that we treasure it in our hearts like Mary did and hold on to it until after Christmas and try to do something with it for ourselves and those around us.

Gary Jules' song ends by calling on us to enlarge our world. For Christians that means simply looking and seeing, seeing where there are real signs of hope to be found; seeing the examples and the activities which are represented by these candles. So in the midst of the madnesses of our world you will know of people who don't wield power but simply care; you'll have seen examples of people being reconciled to one another; you'll know people who are ill or bereaved and are in need of your support; you'll know how children can be examples to us all of vulnerability. You'll be aware of opportunities to be still and quiet with God. These are all signs of hope and each can be represented by one of these candles. In each of them Jesus is to be found.

The baby who lies in the manger, who we worship in the expectancy and excitement of this night, represents all those hopes. He is the ultimate sign that the madness will pass and that the hope that comes only from God is the final truth.

Michael Camp