

Why am I here at this early morning hour?

Homily for Midnight Mass
2018

I am honoured to share with you in this special Christmas Mass at this midnight hour. You have all chosen to be here rather than in that place described by Clement Clarke Moore in his famous poem.

*The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;¹*

Why are you here rather than nestled all snug in your bed? Perhaps it is a tradition for you to attend Midnight Mass out of your deep devotion and love for the Saviour. Maybe you are here because you were invited by a family member or friend. Maybe you are here, under duress, because it is expected of you by your parents. Perhaps you are someone who does not attend Mass regularly but Church at Midnight just seems to be the right place to be at the beginning of Christmas Day. Maybe you are here and aren't really sure if this Liturgy Celebration has any real meaning beyond people gathering, singing and praying to a God, whose very existence you perhaps question. But you are searching, wondering – is there more to life's meaning than I have so far discovered?

Whatever your reason for being here, I welcome you and thank you for your attention as I share with you why I am here at this early morning hour.

I am here because St. Augustine, one of the most respected thinkers in the 2000-year Catholic Tradition (he died in 430) wrote the following explanation as to the significance of Christmas:

Let us then joyfully celebrate the coming of our salvation and redemption. Let us celebrate the festive day on which he who is the great and eternal day came from the great and endless day of eternity into our own short day of time.²

Jesus Christ chose to come from the great and endless day of eternity so as to enter into our own short day of time. This is a poetical expression for saying that Jesus who is fully God, sharing in the splendour of the Trinitarian life of perfect union within the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, chose to humble himself so as to be born fully man in that Bethlehem manger.

I am here because as a Baptized person and a priest for the Roman Catholic Church I have discovered in Jesus Christ, the God/Man - the one who orientates my life in what Augustine refers to as our "own short day of time".

St. Paul in our reading from Titus states the same thing as Augustine this way:

¹ <https://www.teachervision.com/twas-night-christmas-full-text>

² http://www.ibreviary.com/m2/breviario.php?s=ufficio_delle_letture

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all³

Grace is one of the most important words in the Christian lexicon. It is a word that is best translated as gift. The gifts we give at Christmas symbolize this greatest gift, our salvation. What is salvation? Ultimately it means that just as Jesus entered into our own short day of time; when this life is over we will be invited to enter into the great and endless day of eternity. A Church Father who was even older than Augustine, St. Irenaeus, who died in 202 AD wrote:

“He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man ... might become the son of God.”

When we think of salvation in this sense it is kind of like my Christmas Pudding; It was made a month ago and is being saved to be enjoyed with butter sauce at the end of Christmas Dinner tomorrow evening.

The first reason I am here tonight is because I believe that the whole of my earthly life – this short day of time - is to be lived in anticipation of this much greater life beyond the gate of death. Knowing my end gives me purpose in the present because Jesus’ grace is not just for the future. No, his salvation gives us a perspective on life in the present that St. Paul describes this way.

training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly

Because I know my end, I want to train in the present to live a certain way. Think about this in more every day terms. Students who have as their goal mastery of their subject and good grades will train themselves to study purposefully and well. Athletes who want to compete for the prize will train so as to play to their best. Choristers leading our beautiful music this evening, rehearsed purposefully so to sing to God’s glory on this night and our delight!

Thank you, Laudate Choir.

Because I understand my end, my goal I want to train to renounce in this life ways of living that in practice make me forget God, what Paul calls “impiety and worldly passions”. To live with a worldly perspective can never satisfy us because we have been made for more than worldly pursuits can ever fulfill.

This is the message at the heart of our Christmas Gospel. St. Luke begins by locating Jesus birth as taking place in those days:

When a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.⁴

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Tt 2:11). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Lk 2:1). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Emperor Augustus was also called the Prince of Peace because during his reign there was a universal peace the Roman world had not previously known. Augustus represents the best of worldly success. But with such success there is also a tendency to think all that matters in this worldly point of view, thereby making it is easy to live without a moral and ethical purpose. This is the second reason why I am here tonight. I have discovered in the teachings of the Church the direction that allows me to be trained to live a self-controlled and godly life in the present:

while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.⁵

So let me summarize what I've said this far: I want to train myself to live with a purpose in the present because I look forward to this manifestation of the Glory of Jesus in the Future when I will share in the great and endless day of eternity.

But the only reason I can be zealous for good deeds in the present – Paul's words at the end of our reading, - as I look forward to this glorious future is because of what I believe happened 2000 thousand years ago is of greatest importance.

Although Augustus' accomplishments to establish the Pax Romana were making headlines throughout the Roman World, there was another peace declared to lowly shepherds by heavenly reporters:

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”⁶

It is because of this sign, the child wrapped in swaddling bands that I am here tonight. As a priest, I am in a special way called to draw your attention to this child – one whose presence back on that first Christmas was missed by most people but to those shepherds who left their beds at that early morning hour could see in Jesus the true prince of peace – whose reign begins now in the heart of every person who turns to him during our own short day of time, and will be a universal peace when we enter His endless day of eternity.

I am here because Christmas is that sign that has allowed me to see in Jesus the one who inspires me to live purposefully in the present as I await that Day when I hope to discover fully what it means to become a son of God.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Tt 2:13). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Lk 2:10–14). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

I want to invite you for whatever reason you came this evening to realize how receiving the Grace of Jesus allows you to enter into the way of salvation and thereby discover the deeper meaning for your life in this our own short day of time as we wait - even more than I am for my Christmas pudding - that great and eternal day being saved for each of us.