

# LIVERPOOL ARCHDIOCESAN CENTRE FOR EVANGELISATION

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**Introduction to Mass and Homily preached by the Most Reverend Patrick Kelly, Archbishop of Liverpool at Solemn Midnight Mass of Christmas. Friday 25 December 2009 in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool.**

## **Introduction to Mass:**

Whatever about other years, we may not this year rush unheedingly, giddily into this night. Afghanistan forbids it; the death of Rifleman James Brown, 18 years old, who died 10 days ago, blown up by a bomb targeted on women and children in a market place, forbids it. The death of Simon Hornby, of the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment, from here in Halewood, who died a week ago this night, forbids it. Borders bookshops closing, one in Speke, 1,000 employees made redundant four days ago forbids it. This may not be an unthinking carefree celebration. I promise we will come to secure joy, gladness for all, but we may not rush. So first, please be seated and receive this way of proclaiming how far reaching is what we do this night; it was first used over a 1000 years ago. It will be a firm foundation for this year's Midnight Mass.

## **Homily:**

Afghanistan: I promised on the last two Sundays here: we will so celebrate Midnight Mass that mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, children, friends for whom the word Afghanistan means anxiety, pain, mourning, will find joy here tonight.

And I must not distract anyone from their ache; I must not remain silent about this moment in the story of thousands of families; the rest of us may not hurtle along into songs about sleigh-rides, white Christmases, reindeers, as if this is just like all other years. And I want to try to go even this far: let's suppose during the past few hours another 18 year old in Afghanistan where Christmas Day is well under way, saved women and children by using his weapons with the literally deadly skill he had trained for. Can that action be in harmony with our songs tonight? Can we be alongside him and mean all we will say and pray and sing tonight? We will come to a secure yes, and so to unshakeable peace and joy for everyone.

To begin three soldiers will help us. The first: a centurion serving with the army of the Roman Empire then occupying the homeland of Jesus. He had built the synagogue for the Jews in Capernaum. That synagogue was probably decorated with wheat and grapes; wheat for

bread; grapes for wine. And in that place Jesus promised us that we were to eat his Body as our living bread; to drink his Blood as the wine of lasting gladness. And that centurion gave us the prayer with which we come to Our Lord at every Mass, and soldiers will have spoken that soldier's prayer at Midnight Mass in Afghanistan tonight: 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you into my house, but only say the word and I shall be healed'.

A second soldier: the wooden manger of tonight would become his last bed, a wooden cross; his first companions, shepherds, not always known for honest living, would give way to two thieves as he died; and Mary who had pondered this night and all it might mean, would finally take her stand by his cross and hear a centurion, a soldier, proclaim as he died: 'Truly this man was the Son of God.' Tonight we welcome him as our brother, but with the centurion we declare: 'Truly, this child is the Son of God. O come let us adore him.'

So to a third soldier: another centurion, called Cornelius, of the Italian Regiment: a devout man, who feared God, with his entire household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly. This soldier was chosen by God to make Simon Peter realise: 'God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him'. Look around here tonight: many, many nations, many races, many cultures: but as, we will soon sing: 'unam, sanctam, catholicam, apostolicam ecclesiam': 'one, holy, catholic, universal, apostolic Church'.

Through the soldier Cornelius the journey began that would demand that we open our hearts to anyone in need, wherever they might be, in need of safety, dignity, security, justice, even as far as Afghanistan.

And just one more step for this night to belong to those for whom the word Afghanistan casts a shadow, a chill in the heart.

Only four weeks ago I learnt something new about the Christmas story; at 71 that's a bit of a shock to the system. I had never noticed what the words we sing as heavenly host, heavenly throng mean. I had never noticed: the word is army; it's a word like strategy, strategic. The heavenly army sing the song: the heavenly soldiers sing the song. It is not all froth and pretty and cosy: when angels are around they mean business. Big things are stirring. And then I remembered the words of the great Pope Paul VI; 'if you want peace, work, labour for justice. Peace is the fruit of justice'.

Afghanistan: I know it's complicated; I know that this week a petition of 50,000 signatures was presented to No 10 Downing Street calling for an immediate withdrawal of our troops. I know there are very difficult decisions that rest on the desk of politicians. But then I think of the song: 'From a distance' and the description of a planet earth as all blue and green but from a distance. But the point of this night is that the Lord did not remain at a distance. He was made flesh and dwelt among us. It would be comfortable for me to say: the big decisions rest with politicians only. I need not trouble myself with complicated issues. I do not think I may escape so easily. I think of the great Saint Thomas More insisting: 'God gave us wits to serve him wittily'. We have to be attentive, seek to understand, come to judgments and then act. And this has been brought home to me. In the midst of all the confusion, one of the wisest reporters I know who follows the whole situation in the Holy Land, in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan Cristiane Annanpour insists: the NATO forces in Afghanistan and that includes those very dear to some of you here tonight: they are on the side of justice, especially for women and children. In the judgement of many the 18 year old died for their dignity, justice, and so was

laying foundations essential for peace. I also know of three incidents: in one a priest caught up in a hijack was asked to use all the force necessary deal with a passenger who was helping to resolve the threat to every one else. I know of a Christian in South Africa in dark apartheid days that was faced with the demand shoot to kill to save the Mother and her children. And I also know that there are situations when considerable restraint is imposed upon some because they are a threat to others. So, let it be quite clear; if another 18 year old has in the hours of Christmas Day used his weapons yes, to deadly effect, to protect the dignity, the safety, the freedom of especially women and children in Afghanistan, that action was not incompatible with the song of God's heavenly army; the sound it made was not discord in the song of this night.

It is not just another Christmas Night; the hearts of all of us are being opened and blest to be a blessing. And from such hearts Christmas carols ring true and from nowhere else; blessed are those who hunger and thirst and strive and labour and fight with the heavenly army; they shall one day be satisfied. Let our joy this night be secure, deep and true.

**Ends**

**25 December 2009**