

Marcus Walker

There is something truly counter cultural about Midnight Mass

📅 24 December 2022, 9:00am



(Photo: iStock)



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‘A nd girls in slacks remember Dad,
And oafish louts remember Mum,
And sleepless children’s hearts are glad.
And Christmas-morning bells say “Come!”
Even to shining ones who dwell

Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.'

'Christmas'. This poem by Betjeman conjures the magic of the season; conveys in its beat the sense of summons to the place where Christmas is celebrated and Christ is worshipped. This is a draw millions will soon feel, a tug on heart and soul that takes us to a place of candles and carols and babies and ritual and that musty smell of old stones and old books.

Midnight Mass is, for many, the stand-out favourite. The darkness outside sets off the candles inside; the carols take on a deeper meaning as the clock ticks over into the new day and we sing 'Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born *this* happy morning' for the first time this year. There's something that speaks deep into the English psyche that so many have made their pilgrimage to the local church after finishing their pilgrimage to the local pub and stand, swaying, to hear the mystery proclaimed: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

There is something truly counter cultural about Midnight Mass in twenty-first century England. That overlap of serious religion and a heavy night on the sauce offends modern clip-board-bearing, risk-assessment-making bureaucrats as much as it did their Puritan forebears who banned Christmas under Cromwell. That public transport is down, and consumption of alcohol is up, makes this by necessity a local, community act – the pilgrimage must be on foot, which limits the churches we can get to. A national church simply has to be a local church on Christmas Eve or it excludes everyone but the richest or the most geographically fortunate.

*Joining the wonderful,
warm, half-sozzled mass of
humanity for Midnight
Mass is an entrance ticket
like little else.*

There's also something extremely counter cultural in the fact of finding what we need on our doorstep. While our bodies can be fed in vast, soulless out of town shopping centres, our souls not only *can* be fed locally but are often *best* fed there. Even when we're a guest in a community, joining the wonderful, warm, half-sozzled mass of humanity for Midnight Mass is an entrance ticket like little else.

And at that midnight hour we get so many things happening at once. At almost the darkest point of the year we have a reminder that light is coming into the world. So many in that church will be in deep darkness that night: will be feeling the want of the person who has sat next to them for 50 years, or the absence of a child whose cries brought such joy into their lives two decades past, or will know that a cancer is eating into them so that they will not be there next year. Some will have a different cancer eating into them – that of want, of the fear that they won't be able to keep their family warm and fed over the coming months. There will be so many darknesses in that church tonight that it could easily be overwhelmed.

But somehow in the darkness of the night a light shines through. We see it metaphorically, in windows streaming light into dark graveyards. We boisterously sing, 'In the dark streets shineth the everlasting light' and we feel it too in an atmosphere unlike any other night. Something about that service – in the midst of a community we may or may not know, with words that reach back 2,000 years, in carols we know in our hearts – allows the light to enter in, and we are reminded, even if only for one moment in the year, that there is hope, that there is a Light that the darkness can neither comprehend nor overcome.

And funnily enough it's in the basic act of eating and drinking that we encounter the Light most closely. The power of alliteration has triumphed over the English distaste for the word 'mass' and Midnight Mass invites us to share a meal – which is perhaps the most communal of community actions – and to share wine – which should exorcise all those puritans looking sniffily at the happy pilgrims from the pub. And as we come back from that meal, that ritual which takes us at once not only to a frosty stable in Bethlehem but also to a certain green hill far away, there is a little more light being shone around the world. And, no matter how much we've drunk before and no matter how firmly convinced we might be that it may all be nonsense, that light now shines from us too.

And, going back to families, now deep in sleep, waiting for the gifts wafted in from the North Pole (or an out-of-town shopping centre) we can shine a little bit of light, caught – like a candle from a candle – from the hope of Midnight Mass in the heart of our families and friends.

Merry Christmas.

WRITTEN BY

Marcus Walker

The Revd Marcus Walker is Rector of the Priory Church of St Bartholomew the Great, London.



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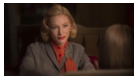
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Best Newest Oldest



Elinor Dashwood

🕒 12 minutes ago

Beautiful piece. I have attended countless midnight masses in my day, both Roman Catholic and

Beautiful piece. I have attended countless midnight masses in my day, both Roman Catholic and Anglican. They never fail to move me deeply.

And then at 2:00 AM, we would troop home through mountains of snow to eat Tourtière in honour of my French grandmother (who married a Scot and raised her children in English, but never forgot the recipes).

Merry Christmas to my fellow commenters.

 0  0 • Reply • Share ›



David Simpson 

 2 hours ago

Amen to that

 0  0 • Reply • Share ›



sparemethedrivel 

 2 hours ago

Last one I went to, my house was broken into while I was out.

After dealing with a smashed door, locksmiths, police I guess I came to the conclusion that they needed the loose change more than I. (turns out recently released from jail, staying with relative in the neighbourhood returning to 'happy hunting ground'). what a pain.

 1  0 • Reply • Share ›



Victoria Phillips 

 2 hours ago

What a wonderful article. Merry Christmas all!

 0  0 • Reply • Share ›



Otis B Driftwood 

 2 hours ago

My very religious parents never went to Midnight Mass. They said it was full of drunks who were never seen in church at any other time

 0  0 • Reply • Share ›



Tom Armstrong  → Otis B Driftwood

 2 hours ago

That why barely religious folk like me go Otis.

 0  0 • Reply • Share ›



Piper 

 3 hours ago

I was expecting this to be about Midnight Mass the vampire show

 0  0 • Reply • Share ›



Jean Poule 

 3 hours ago edited

You like poetry? Fine, try this:

Of all the things that dislike about the Christmas season
The two which threaten most of all to rid me of my reason
Are wireless music stations which I cannot listen to
Without the risk of hearing either Wham's or Rutter's goo
And close behind this horror is the fact that I can never
Express such sentiment without some twerp who thinks he's clever
Responding with "Bah Humbug!" and then grinning like a fool
That's why I'm glad that we have nearly seen the back of Yule.

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Sherbert

🕒 3 hours ago

Taking my children to midnight mass for the first time this as a result of this piece. Happy Christmas and God bless everyone

👍 3 🗨️ 0 • Reply • Share ›



Tom Armstrong

🕒 3 hours ago

Well said Rev. The local church I will attend tonight has stood a thousand years. It has seen them all, longbowmen who fought in the Hundred Years War, Border Reivers, farmers, wives, husbands, children. All with their hopes and fears concentrated onto that small space. You can feel the history. The history of real people who were very different but just like us. Midnight mass is a very moving occasion.

And, of course, the oldest pub we have is just across the market square.

👍 5 🗨️ 0 • Reply • Share ›



Elinor Dashwood → Tom Armstrong

🕒 6 minutes ago

Merry Christmas to you, Tom. Many good conversations over the year.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 • Reply • Share ›



Sword_of_Truth

🕒 3 hours ago

Beautifully written, Marcus. I hide under an alias on here but we were at our Oxford college at the same time, and I've watched your career ever after with great interest and satisfaction. A very happy Christmas to you.

👍 3 🗨️ 0 • Reply • Share ›



Boiled Frog

🕒 3 hours ago

Thank You! And a very Merry Christmas to you and yours.

👍 2 🗨️ 0 • Reply • Share ›



Mike Gardner

🕒 3 hours ago

Wonderful stuff - thanks very much.

👍 1 🗨️ 0 • Reply • Share ›



Mara

🕒 4 hours ago

Lovely. Thank you. And Merry Christmas.

👍 6 🗨️ 0 • Reply • Share ›



Bill Thomas

🕒 4 hours ago

Stolen from today's letters in the Torygraph:

"(...Note the) growth in the number of Church of England bishops from 26 to some 116 in less than 200 years, while congregation numbers have plunged by more than 90 per cent.

The bureaucracies of the 42 dioceses have grown commensurately. In 2018, the Diocese of Leicester had 108 employees. In 1926, it had only one: the bishop's driver."

👍 6 🗨️ 0 • Reply • Share ›



Tom Armstrong → Bill Thomas

🕒 3 hours ago

The public sector all over. In 1854 there were only 16,000 civil servants. Now there are almost

490,000 of them.

 1  0 • Reply • Share ›



David Simpson  → Tom Armstrong

🕒 2 hours ago

And Her Majesty's Empire of India was administered by 1,000

 1  0 • Reply • Share ›



opopanax

🕒 5 hours ago

A beautiful piece. Thank you so much. Needless to say our new vicar will not be celebrating Midnight Mass in our local church this year, but in one too many miles away for walking. But you have evoked so strong a memory of the beautiful peace and joy that this service brings that I find myself in tears.

 8  0 • Reply • Share ›



Joe Ross

🕒 5 hours ago

The Oxen

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.

"Now they are all on their knees,"

An elder said as we sat in a flock

By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where

They dwelt in their strawy pen,

Nor did it occur to one of us there

To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave

In these years! Yet, I feel,

If someone said on Christmas Eve

"Come; see the oxen kneel,

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb

Our childhood used to know,"

I should go with him in the gloom,

Hoping it might be so.

Thomas Hardy

 9  0 • Reply • Share ›



JD de Pavilly

🕒 5 hours ago

Thank you. It's a very lovely service. Our's starts at 11.15pm so the host is celebrated at Midnight.

 7  0 • Reply • Share ›



Bill

🕒 6 hours ago

No Christmas service at all in our village (it really is a shame how the Anglican Church is in decline).

The last Midnight service we attended was lovely in particular because we were permitted to take our well behaved dog along who was fully accounted for. The first Midnight mass I attended was when I accompanied my Catholic aunt as a child and it went on for what seemed ages. Still had to wait to open my presents the following morning.

 7  0 • Reply • Share ›



JD de Pavilly → Bill

🕒 5 hours ago



What a shame. Our little village church has a Crib Service this afternoon, Midnight Mass in the next door village church, Christmas morning Communion and then St Stephens Day morning prayer tomorrow. Sounds like your priest and churchwardens need a kick up the posterior.

3 0 • Reply • Share ›



Big Dog

🕒 6 hours ago

Current parish doesn't do a midnight mass but there is indeed nothing quite like them. Merry Christmas all.

8 0 • Reply • Share ›



Hamburger

🕒 6 hours ago

Frohe Weihnachten from Hamburg.

13 0 • Reply • Share ›



TomTom McOot → Hamburger

🕒 4 hours ago

Und zu dir! I'm near Hamburg right now, in a small town in the Nordheide. Early Christmas Mass (as the Catholic parish is very spread out, three churches and one priest) then Christmas Eve dinner. As others note, the Germans do Christmas best - still a real sense of the sacred here.

3 0 • Reply • Share ›



Hamburger → TomTom McOot

🕒 3 hours ago

We Catholics are thinly spread in the North.

1 0 • Reply • Share ›



JamesR → Hamburger

🕒 4 hours ago

The Germans do it best in my opinion. Especially in the small towns and villages.(Black Forest)
Frohe Weinachten.

4 0 • Reply • Share ›



Bill → Hamburger

🕒 5 hours ago

Merry Christmas. My first memories of Christmas are of those when we lived in Germany. It was wonderful with from memory plenty of snow too.

3 0 • Reply • Share ›



pj

🕒 6 hours ago

It's rarely at Midnight, nowadays

1 0 • Reply • Share ›



Hamburger → pj

🕒 6 hours ago

I understood that the communion should be just before midnight.

2 1 • Reply • Share ›



Patricia Yeiser → Hamburger

🕒 2 hours ago

When I was a chorister at the Episcopal Cathedral here, we had Christmas Eve services at 11PM. The Rector insisted that during the singing of "Oh Come All Ye

services at 11 PM. The Rector insisted that during the singing of "On Come All Ye Faithful," we sang the stanza beginning with "Yae, Lord we greet Thee" precisely at Midnight. Sometimes the organist had to improvise, with his eye on his watch, but we were right on time.

 2  0 • Reply • Share ›



Biggles lit another cigarette  → Hamburger

 6 hours ago

The Roman Catholic midnight mass starts at midnight.

 2  0 • Reply • Share ›



Sherbert  → Biggles lit another cigarette

 3 hours ago

Not in Hertfordshire. My town has two catholic masses. One starting at 10 pm and the other at 11 pm

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Hamburger  → Biggles lit another cigarette

 5 hours ago

Not in Hamburg!

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Mordwinoff  → Hamburger

 6 hours ago

I believe that is to allow you to take communion the next day at main service with family as laity not meant to receive twice in one day....

 1  0 • Reply • Share ›



Hamburger  → Mordwinoff

 5 hours ago

I understood that the Christian Sabbath began on Saturday evening. I may be wrong.

 1  0 • Reply • Share ›



Angus J  → Hamburger

 5 hours ago

That's a very interesting point. That understanding may well go back to the time before the change from one day to the next was taken to be midnight, since I know that for Jewish people that transition happens at sunset - so the Jewish Sabbath starts at sunset on what by western reckoning is the Friday evening.

Your comment has intrigued me and may prompt me into doing some research. Thank you, and Merry Christmas.

 4  0 • Reply • Share ›



Hamburger  → Angus J

 3 hours ago

If you anything find, do post your results here please.
Frohe Weihnachten.

 0  0 • Reply • Share ›



Reluctant Mlungu 

 6 hours ago

Indeed... beautifully written!
Merry Christmas, everyone.

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