Midnight Mass 2024

Isaiah 9.2-7; Titus 2.11-14; Luke 2.1-20

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

The word *mystery* has its roots in Greek, from *muo* (μυω), "to shut". In the ancient world, there were two senses of shutting in operation here. The first concerns the shutting of the eyes: and so, a mystery is that which is concealed from us. The second concerns the shutting of the lips: and so, a mystery is that which we must not utter.

And yet, even in those days, the word already suggested *dis*closure; the revelation of things once hidden; secrets not entirely withheld, but spoken. The modification *mueo* (μυέω) eventually comes to mean "to initiate" or even "to teach", referring specifically to a

disciples' entrance into a kind of secret society, which we now call, rather ominously, "mystery cults".

As the Greek of the New Testament began to be rendered into Latin, two different words were used for *musterion* (μυστήριον), the totally uncreative mysterium—a transliteration rather than a translation—but also much more interesting *sacramentum*, which was an oath, such as one that a soldier would make in allegiance to the Emperor.

Ever since, both terms—mysteries and sacraments—have been used to refer to the sacraments of the Church; baptism first of all, and then the Eucharist, with Ordination and Marriage and others later. All that stuff about initiation rites and oaths of allegiance lie in the background of early Christian sacramental theology. But something else emerged too, and became the dominant way in which the Church thought and spoke about itself. And it is in terms of *signs*.

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This will be a sign for you. It was obvious then in the first centuries of the Christian era as it is to us now, and indeed as it has always been to people everywhere, that rituals *mean* something. It means something to enter the water, thrice blessed, in the name of the Father, and again, in the name of the Son, and again, in the name of the Holy Spirit. It means something to gather together and break bread together, share a cup of wine. These were not things to be done mindlessly, thoughtlessly. They said something important: maybe about us, but maybe also to us, maybe even about God, who maybe is even the one doing the saying, is the medium and the message, the everything, all at once.

The medium is the message. That's what they say, right? It is the phrase that, in 1964, invented "media studies", now a much-

maligned and ridiculed social science; but that is itself telling. Back then, a heartbeat after TV became universal, and right as colour TV was taking off, no one thought that the medium of transmission was of any interest: it was all about content. It didn't matter how something was said, just what was said. This seems so obviously wrong now, which is why the central thesis of media studies as a discipline seems passé to us.

The medium is the message. What the Canadian literary theorist Marshall McLuhan meant was that the medium itself is a causal force: it does something to us, as individuals and societies. TV does something to us. The Internet does something to us—which, by the way, he predicted thirty years before the World Wide Web came live. And the eucharist too; and baptism. Even before we get to what is being said in and through these things, something has already happened. McLuhan is often said to have kept his religious views

private; but maybe he didn't compartmentalise things as much as he thought—he happens to have been a convert to Catholicism in his late-twenties, decades before this seminal work in media theory.

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The medium is the message. This will be a sign to you. Before baptism and the eucharist; before the Church itself; there was a baby, who was said to be a sign. It carried a message, it meant—he means something—something, a mystery too holy for words. Believe me, we have tried to talk about him; for two thousand years, we have tried to express what this baby means, to us, for us, for us all, for everyone, everything. God knows, I have tried in this pulpit: to say something of what the Incarnation means, because it does mean something—he does mean something.

He is a sign to us, the sign, the medium who is his own message, which is the inconceivable and thus unutterable message that, once upon a somewhen, somewhere, eternity and omnipresence itself arrived in time and place; that the God who is the mystery beyond all things becomes a thing, small enough to fit in a feeding trough, to fit in his mother's arms, to fit on a Roman Cross, to fit in stone-hewn tomb.

That is a truth that simply cannot be articulated without descending into contradiction and nonsense—on that, Christians and atheists happen to agree. Our words and concepts fail in the presence of the God who comes to be born amongst us, to live with us, to die for us.

We are, among creatures, as far as we can tell, the speaking part of things, the knowing animals whose ability to understand the world is frankly astounding, and it is incredible that we take it so for granted. We—

our species of hairless apes—have no business being able to know what we know: about the rest of creation, about space-time and psychology and…snails, or whatever.

But on *this* matter—the incarnation of God, which is the collapsing of the most fundamental distinction of all, between creator and creation—[on this matter], none of our usual tools and tricks will do. There are no equations for this; no syllogisms; no experiments; no words.

And so, in a moment, we will finally give up on words altogether. Because, as it turns out, the best that Christians have ever been able to do to articulate what Jesus means is to scramble around until we find water and bread and wine. And we enter into the water; the bread and wine enter us; we join with these basic, fundamental elements of life, as if to say that this baby is life—life itself, our lives, everyone's life.

Our moment of abandoning words won't last long, but it is, in fact, the heart of what we do here every Sunday, the essential moment in our liturgy. It is the where the sacred and mundane meet, the divine and the human, in response to the incarnation itself. We will, if we are able, kneel, which is a special and solemn posture; and we will, if we are willing, eat and drink, which is the most normal thing in the world.

And by doing so, we sacralise the mundane, we offer up the everyday—our every day—to God, who did it first, on a night like tonight, brought heaven to earth, made earth into heaven, the dwelling place of the Most High God.

In silence we will make signs: our open hands and lips signifying at least a desire to open our hearts, to open ourselves to becoming signs ourselves, mediums of this message, this mystery of world so unspeakably beloved.