



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Midnight Mass 2023

The Jesuit priest and poet Robert Southwell was hanged at Tyburn, in this parish in 1595. In 1970, as one of the Forty English and Welsh Martyrs, he was canonized by Pope Paul VI.

One of his poems, *In Freezing Winter Night*¹, was used by Benjamin Britten, in his 1943 work, *A Ceremony of Carols*.

Southwell's poem and Britten's musical sequence were both written in the midst of dreadful times: Southwell lived and died under the late religious persecutions of Elizabeth I, whilst Britten composed his work in the middle years of the Second World War.

In his poem, Southwell asks us to gaze with joy on the piteous sight of a homely manger and see there a child who holds heaven and earth in his trembling body: a child shut out of society, because there was no room for him, nor for his parents.

A heavenly throne has been swapped for a few handfuls of hay; heavenly courtiers have been replaced by animals and the rough poor shepherds.

¹ *In Freezing Winter Night*, Southwell, R., d. 1595

Yet, here he is, the silly tender babe, who is King of Time and Eternity, the source of all Love and Life, the One through whom all that is or could be, has come into being.

On *this* holy night, as devastating obscene wars, and self-serving political intrigues and wrangles, rage around the world and all seems so dark and so troubled, we are invited to stop, enter a hurriedly borrowed stable in Bethlehem, and gaze on a new-born baby.

But we are not beckoned in just to stand and look, but to take that tender babe's hand in ours and, in our hearts, enthrone him as our King.

It's a big ask, perhaps the greatest of all asks, but are we prepared to cross the threshold of that stable cable, kneel down before the child we find there, offer him our very selves, as he offers his very self to us, and in and through this wonderful exchange, discover that there is another way: a way where the wolf lives at peace with the lamb, where the leopard plays with the kid; a way where calf and lion and bear and ox feed happily together at the same trough and the world finds it longed-for peace.

This is the ask of Christmas. Can I place myself, my whole being, heart, body, mind and soul, into the tiny hands of a little child, the child who holds in *his* very being, the unbounded reconciling and healing Life and Love that is the world's true peace, the peace that passes all understanding.

In a few minutes, this child of Bethlehem will be offered to each of us in the bread of Holy Communion; the bread that is the very

flesh and blood of the baby in the manger in Bethlehem and the man who hanged on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem.

It is up to us to reach out our hands and receive him, to welcome him, to become one with him, as he is one with us, to help usher in God's Kingdom of love and joy and peace, not just this Christmas, but every day until, at last, his Kingdom comes.

Behold, a silly tender babe, in freezing winter night,
In homely manger trembling lies. Alas, a piteous sight!
The inns are full; no man will yield this little pilgrim bed.
But forced he is with silly beasts in crib to shroud his head.
This stable is a Prince's court, this crib his chair of State;
The beasts are parcel of his pomp, the wooden dish his plate.

The persons in that poor attire his royal liveries wear;
The Prince himself is come from heaven; this pomp is prized there.

With joy approach, O Christian wight, do homage to thy King,

And highly praise his humble pomp, which he from Heaven doth bring.

A very happy Christmas to you all.