

## **SERMON FOR MIDNIGHT MASS | 24.12.2016**

**Have you ever played the game ‘Are you there, Moriarty’? If you’ve never played it, it involves lying down on the ground with a rolled up length of newspaper in one hand and the hand of your opponent in the other. As you lie there, blindfolded, you ask the question, “Are you there, Moriarty?” When they reply, you then have to work out where their body lies so that you can belt them with the aforementioned role of newspaper, as hard as you can! Watching the players squirming around your sitting room floor really is as much fun to watch as it is to play!**

**But that question is not just for generations of Church young people in Quest Christmas parties: it is the questions that seems to be on everyone’s minds recently. Looking back on 2016 – *where were the good people when we needed them?* With the aftermath of the Berlin Christmas market carnage; with the US President-elect tweeting foreign policy on the hoof; with no one having any clear idea how the BREXIT negotiations are going to pan out, we could be forgiven for thinking we are more at sea, more isolated, more vulnerable now than for a very long time. *Where are people when you need them; who cares for us now?***

**Talking to Matthew Crawford who own Noah’s Ark in Upper Street on Friday, I asked him how trade was doing this Christmas? He looked almost embarrassed when he said that it had been a bumper year – but he didn’t know why.**

**Yet the evidence was all around us. Looking at the shop floor there was hardly an inch that wasn’t filled with people clutching packages, while the girls on the tills were telling people that many items were out of stock. Could it be, that in the middle of such political and social uncertainty – when so many things have gone wrong - that the temptation to buy ourselves some happiness and some fun as an antidote to the news, gets stronger and stronger?**

**All over the world tonight there will be people in Church who only come occasionally – possibly only on Midnight Mass. If you are one of them, then a very warm welcome – but I ask again the question: why are you and I here, rather than in the local bar or on the floor wrapping up yet more Christmas presents – or even, if you are fit, playing ‘Are you there Moriarty?!’**

Could it be that we are looking for something rather more worthwhile and solid than what the shopping malls have to offer?

Rabbi Lionel Blue, the hugely entertaining speaker on Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day' who died recently, had a hugely perceptive way of looking at the world and sometimes its darkest and most intractable issues – drawn from his experience of being both a central European Jew who had survived the Holocaust, and of being a gay man.

But his greatest skill, it seems to me, is that he was able to be positive even when things were not going well. He would note that *I began to see that my problems, seen spiritually, were really my soul's plusses and that many of the failures and challenges of my life have had the effect of teaching me pity, sympathy and what it is like to be at the other end of the stick...*

I think that one of the reasons why he was called 'the nation's most loved cleric' was because he didn't labour the misery or wallow in the gloom. A not untypical comment was a culinary one: *If a dish doesn't turn out right, he would say, change the name – and don't bat an eyelid. A fallen soufflé is, after all, only a risen omelette.*

We like people who are upbeat, who make us laugh, take us dancing, tell jokes and can be seen to be the life and soul of the party. It is slightly unfortunate that neither Teresa May nor Jeremy Corbyn appear to have been blessed with great senses of humour; whereas Barack Obama can smooch down onto the dance floor or pick up a mic and show himself to be a pretty smart entertainer.

But can we trust Obama more than May or Corbyn just because he is a better communicator and has a winsome smile?

For all the attractiveness of those who radiate a comforting confidence, the heart of Christmas - the real Christmas - is actually extremely unpromising: no money, no home, no wedding license, no clue about what the future would bring. And yet it is this situation that Isaiah got all excited about 800 years before Jesus was finally revealed in that famous 'pre-owned' manger: *look around you, says Isaiah, listen to the heralds ad those who are talking positively: you God reigns!*

***He is here, working among men and women of good-will doing good, transforming lives, making peace and creating opportunities where none was there before. The light is there if only you will see it.***

**But, by way of a setting – not surprisingly – Isaiah doesn't take us to the shops or to the places where the rich and famous celebs hang out, he takes us to the Felix Project which distributes unwanted food around London, to the Crisis at Christmas centres spread around the nation; he takes us to spartan rooms up and down the land where Samaritan volunteers wait patiently by the phone, ready and willing to listen to people who believe that no-one cares a damn about them. He points to young Hope Dixey or to the people who turned up for the Pack-Up lunch last week, and he reminds us that it doesn't matter who we are, what we can or can't do, what we are or what we have done, God wants to make sure we all know we are loved and are worthwhile.**

**It's so easy to use Church-speak and sing the word Emmanuel at the end of Hark the Herald with barely a second glance. As we sing, how many of us miss what the word Emmanuel is actually driving at: *God is with us*, yes, but also: *God is with us as we are...***

**When we play silly games like 'Are you there Moriarty?', there is a message in there somewhere. Because within all of us is the desire to reach out to others – not to bang them with a newspaper necessarily – but to be cherished, wanted and loved.**

**Tonight we thank God for all those Moriartys who have been there for us and those who will help us to know the light of God when the going seems too rough to find it on our own. Tonight, however bad 2016 has been, we thank God that, in one form or another, we have people around us who show us God's love and who care for us: that, despite appearances sometimes, *we never walk alone*. We thank God for those who refuse to be beaten and who point out to us the good things we can so easily overlook. But tonight we also take a moment to focus on that vulnerable child in the manger and wonder for whom we should care? For whom we will be an 'Emmanuel' figure in 2017? In what way will we bring light and hope to those in darkness?**

**Christmas. Reaching out to those who need us. "Are you there, Moriarty?"**