

A COSMOS LIT FROM BETHLEHEM:

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Dr Richard Major
to the Anglican church in Zagreb
(meeting at St Joseph's Chapel, in the Jesuit seminary of the Immaculate Heart of Mary)
at Mass on Advent IV,
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lightly adapted from 12xii10;

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Isaiah lii⁷⁻¹⁰; Psalm ^{xviii};

Hebrews i¹⁻⁴;

John i¹⁻¹⁴.

From the Gospel:

*The true Light,
which lighteth
every man that cometh
into the world.*

In the Name of the
Father,
the Son
and the Holy Ghost:
Amen.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY DOES NOT TELL US what happened at Christmas. It tells us what happened since the universe was made, and what will happen until the universe ends – and afterward. The Christmas story even tells you what is happening to you today; and what will happen to you tomorrow; and why.

Nothing we ever hear is as deadly serious as this tale.

I know that's not quite how we usually think of Christmas. We imagine Christmas as a mere midwinter frolic, a firelit revel, a brief holiday from the usual gravity of life: something exceptional and almost magic. We even commit the fatuity, the astonishing blasphemy of thinking that Christmas is *something for children*.

Christmas isn't like that. The Christmas story is the most adult thing we will ever hear. It takes us to the heart of reality. It reveals the cosmos to us.

What is this universe of ours like? It's a trainwreck, the site of a huge catastrophe.

Everywhere we look we see joyous energy – except in ourselves. Everything seems sublime – except you and me. And yet we human beings were clearly meant to be the pinnacle of the whole, to be godlike, to be intelligent, beautiful and splendid. Some appalling flaw ruins us. We are born twisted. We find ourselves endlessly doing what makes us ashamed and unhappy. Our first reading, using mythical language, shows us what is wrong. Since before history began, humanity has been in revolt against God. Each generation staggers from the rubble of the one before. We emerge mortally wounded.

What, then? Having cut itself from God, is mankind doomed? Yes, of course. And yet, no. God did not accept the fact of our rebellion. He dared the most fantastic ploy to bring us back to Himself (for His love is infinite, as is His cunning). If man was to run away from God, then very well, God would become a man. And thus we could never escape Him.

Into the hopelessness of human history – selfishness, despair, lust, error, war – descends a roar of infinite and uncreated light (*the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world*). Peasants in the hills of a remote Roman province seem to see the sky burn away, and for an appalling minute they look into eternity, into the spinning energy, the everlasting rapture, the shouted praise of the immortals. *Glory to God in the highest!* The vision ends, the night sky slams closed again, and they scramble down the hill, to find a tavern, and a shed or cave or ruin behind the tavern, in which a baby has just been born in great squalor and confusion.

All our hope and all our thinking orbits round that odd, violent, silent night, the night when God emerged in the world as a man, as a human infant: your cousin and mine.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He has never ceased dwelling among us. Because of Christmas night, God the Spirit fills your mind and orders your life. Because of Christmas night, God the Father waits to receive you when the triumph of your life is over. Indeed when the universe itself is over, we will all be singing glory to God in the highest. And because of Christmas night, God the Son is human, our companion and friend.

God of God, Light of Light, begotten not created (as the Creed insists and the carol repeats), He chose to dwell in the Virgin's womb, and to come forth in human littleness. In a few minutes He will lie in the palm of your hand, in the same littleness He bore at Christmas, lying in the feeding trough.

These mysteries shake the mind. But they drive the heart to its supremacy of joy, the joy of Christmas. And there is nothing more serious than that.

**Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace!
Amen.**

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Albrecht Altdorfer, *Nativity* (c. 1513), Staatliche Museen, Berlin