

## Midnight Mass

It is not my intention to disturb the faith of decent people, nor is it appropriate for me on this glorious night to challenge the dearly held convictions which people have cherished over the years. However my sense of integrity and my commitment to the truth as I see it compels me to make a bold statement of fact:- Rudolf the Red-nosed reindeer does not exist. There is very little historical evidence to prove that he ever did exist. I do have evidence, however, that even if he did at one time exist, he exists no longer. My four year old grandson assured me that when Santa recently visited Nafferton, he arrived on a boat on the lake; and the same grandson saw with his own eyes Santa arriving in Kilham on a tractor. No reindeer – no Rudolf. You might argue that in this climate of economic restraint Rudolf has been made redundant. You may wish to quote the ancient prophet, Bing Crosby, who believed that there were several reindeer involved in pulling Santa's sleigh – but I remain sceptical. I believe that it's all a myth. What I would agree to is the idea that behind the myth there lies a great truth hidden. That truth is that the spirit of Christmas is a spirit of generosity and love which is visited upon people throughout the world whatever their race or creed and not even dependent upon whether or not they have a chimney.

No one was interested in the birth of Richard Burton until he had died. And then, many people throughout the world enquired of his origins. Were his parents great actors? From whence came this great talent? What sort of upbringing did he have? People came from distant parts of the world to visit his humble birth place in Pontrhydyfen in South Wales. His real name was Richard Walter Jenkins.

Similarly, no one was interested in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, until he had died. Then, about fifty years after his death, two great writers gave us their accounts of his birth. One of them, Matthew by name, told us that the mother of Jesus was married to a man called Joseph. He went on to describe the visit of some 'stargazers' who came to pay homage to the child Jesus. He also told a quite remarkable journey to Egypt which was undertaken to avoid the anger of the King, who subsequently killed all the baby boys under two years of age living in Bethlehem at that time. The other writer, a man called Luke told quite a different story independently of Matthew. Luke told of some shepherds in the fields at night having a vision of angels and being miraculously led to the place where Jesus was born. Also a strange story about there being no room in the local Inn!

Strange stories indeed! Whether or not these stories were historically true, it matters not a jot. What certainly is true is that behind these stories there is a very remarkable human being who had such a huge effect on his contemporaries that they called him a son of God. He had such an amazing effect on society at that time that the religious authorities accused him of blasphemy for which he paid the ultimate death penalty. It is that man – that baby – to whom we open our hearts tonight.

Amen.