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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

A day that is wrapped in the splendour of paradise

THE commotion is over and the weary world is finally at peace. Pilgrims have returned home to rest with those they love. The fires are lit and preparations for the great feast are at an end.

Christmas Eve is the highlight of my year. It is a day when we see humanity at its best. As always, Dickens captured it perfectly when he wrote that, 'apart from the veneration due to its sacred name', it is the only time 'in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave'.

On this beautiful day, you see the most extraordinary things. As if released from their burdens, people smile as they stroll through the streets. They think nothing of emptying their pockets for those in need.

It is day when the things that truly matter take priority. At a certain point, we withdraw from the world and head indoors. There, we discover the simple beauty of being together.

Christmas Eve offers us a glimpse of how it always should be.

We find comfort in simple things such as sharing a meal, chatting away the hours or sitting with the children as they enjoy their favourite film.

No rushing or pushing, just quiet repose with loved ones.

It is as if the shadows suddenly subside and we see clearly how life ought to be lived. On this day, you see people rise to their true height. You see them laugh and love, pray and play.

If the churches are full, it is because we want to reconnect with everything that makes life worthwhile. I have witnessed people, long since separated from the old religion, weep during the Vigil Mass of Christmas.

Somehow, in the midst of all their darkness, they have found the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Even now, in a world that no longer believes, Christmas Eve has the power to help and heal. As a child, I remember enemies embracing and estranged relatives finding their way home. That they were welcomed with open arms testifies to the miracles that can happen on this day.

Christmas Eve: a day of magic when we forget about ourselves and rejoice in the happiness of others. A day when children are made to feel as they always should. A day when we realise why, even if it has never 'put a scrap of gold or silver' in our pockets, it has done us good, and will do us good.

At dawn on Christmas Eve, we light

the candles. They burn throughout the day as a symbol of our belonging. They have lit our way through the winter, and now they guide us into this 'night divine'.

In that sweet glow, our boys discuss the imminent arrival of St Nicholas. They sing carols and wait expectantly for people to call. Everything about this day electrifies them.

They know it is the eve of something wonderful. Not presents only, but a day feasting with all their family.

They know it is the beginning of a season when the house is always full and when the laughter never seems to fade.

And then, as night falls, it is time to raise a toast to the great saint as he sets off around the globe.

It is time to read aloud *The Night Before Christmas*, time to remember whose birthday we shall celebrate as the new day dawns.

It is not often that people go to sleep smiling. Too often, we take our troubles to the pillow.

On this day, however, few of us drift off despondently.

SO go now and savour what is left of this good and perfect day. Savour the smiles, the love that you see in small acts of kindness. Savour the peace that is everywhere apparent.

Cherish the hours in candlelight, the carols as they sound from every street corner. Cherish the sight of families as they get ready for the big day. Yes, cherish the steady stream of those 'led by the light of Faith serenely beaming'.

And when you finally shut out the night, and put the little ones to sleep, sit and be at peace. Pour a tincture of your favourite and treasure this night divine. Look for the 'star sweetly gleaming' and let it guide you into a 'new and glorious morn'.

Christmas Eve: a day when dreams really do come true. So let us go and make the most of it. Let us watch as the weary world rejoices, smile as it sings and enjoy every second of a day that will soon be a blessed memory.

And as you do, may you experience all the wonder and joy of this sacred season. May happiness fill your homes and light shine in your hearts.

Sadly, however, I must now leave you. I hear some strangely suspicious giggles outside my door. The candles are burning and the aroma of a fresh brew is in the air.

It is time to put down my pen and give myself the greatest Christmas box of all: precious memories forged from the promises of a day that comes to us wrapped in the splendour of paradise.

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