

## Midnight Mass 2016

I want to start in a very different place than this beautiful church, with the candlelight and the carols. I want you to imagine a dark pavement by a bus-stop in Eltham, South East London, nearly twenty four years ago. A young black man, just eighteen years old, Stephen Lawrence, has just been stabbed to death for no other reason than that he is black. Stabbed, killed, just for who he was. That murder, and the police investigation that followed it, which went wrong in so many, many ways became a huge story in this country for years. The Metropolitan Police force stood accused of incompetence, and worse, of racism and corruption. Even now, the controversy still bubbles away. Only in September, it was revealed that a crucial piece of evidence – perhaps part of the murder weapon itself - had been mislabelled at the very beginning of the enquiry, and thus ignored. Only now are police beginning to follow up the DNA traces left on it.

The Stephen Lawrence case moved a long, long way from that dark pavement. It moved to court-rooms, to Downing Street, to the headlines of all the national press, day after day, year after year. But at its heart, of course, it remained about a young man bleeding to death on a London pavement. And as he lay dying, two good people crouched by his side, and tried to stop the bleeding, and cradled his head, and one of them, Louise Taffe, whispered to him: 'you are loved. You are loved.' She had never met Stephen before. She was just on her way home from church when she came across this terrible thing, and as she knelt and tried to help she knew that the one thing she had to say to a dying boy was 'you are loved, you are loved.'

If there's one thing I hope you hear tonight, if there is one thing I hope you hear in all the church services you ever attend, if there's one thing I hope you hear above all the advertising and family dramas and gossipy conversations, above all the noise of our lives, it is this: *you are loved*. If there's one thing I hope sinks in despite everything in the world which tries to tell you different, which tells you that you're rubbish, that you only matter if you've got money, or success, or beauty, or fame, it is this: *you are loved*. The Christian Gospel is that this is the first, most fundamental, most basic thing

about you. Before you know anything about it, before you can do anything about it, whether you know it or not, whether you want it or not: *you are loved*.

I'm not talking here about your partner, or your children, or your parents. I hope all those people do love you, though lots of us are not very good at it – and some of us are downright disastrously awful. I'm talking about a love which underlies all human loves, which runs deeper and stronger and fuller than even the best of them – a love which disappointment and death cannot even begin to erode. A love that began when you were a tiny collection of cells in the womb, and which will endure when you return to the dust. You are loved from your beginning to your end and beyond.

How do I know this? Because I have listened long and deep and hard to the one John's Gospel calls the Word – to the man Jesus of Nazareth, in whose church we meet. Christians call him the Word because we think that in Him Reality, the Universe, God, said all that it wanted to say. That in this man, if we would just stop and listen, we would hear all the secrets of our existence, all the meaning of our life. That we are not meaningless flukes. That life is not absurd and chaotic. That it has a point: that we were *wanted* here, loved into existence, and that our lives are about growing ever more deeply out of and into that love.

You will only know this if you stop, and listen, to this man Jesus, to this Word. If you learn to be still, to read the Bible, to come to communion, to pray. There is all sorts of noise in the world, which will try to stop you from doing that. It will try to persuade you not to think about why you are on this planet, or what you are for. It might even whisper to you that there is no why, that there is no point. Cut out the noise. Listen to the Word: listen deep, listen hard, listen long to Jesus, and you will know that you are loved. That's just what being human is.

Which means, you will see, quite a lot for how we deal with each other. If each one of us is loved, loved before we make ourselves worthwhile, loved just because we are, not because of what we've done or what we've got, then how dare we despise each other? If each of us was loved into existence, and is wanted by God, and called by Him to grow more and more in love, then how dare we discard each other? How dare we sit quietly when our neighbours – people in this very county – don't have enough to eat? How dare we have nuclear weapons – a defence policy which involves threatening to kill hundreds of thousands of innocent lives? And if those things seem too big, too far away from you, then think smaller. How dare we pay someone less than what they need to live? Or let the family next door struggle? How dare we do *anything* which treats another person as less than what they are – the eternally loved, infinitely precious, simply cherished, child of God? How dare we?

You are loved. You are loved, Louise Taffe whispered to Stephen Lawrence. Hear her words. Know they're for you, and for the person sitting next to you, and for the stranger you've never met. Know them, learn them, let them dwell in you richly. Live your lives by them. Then, you will know what Christmas is about. Amen.