

“This is the night!”

The Exultet

One of the most popular of Christmas carols is ‘O Holy Night’ from the nineteenth century.¹

The words will be familiar to many of you:

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!

Since we last heard those words just four months ago we have followed Our Lord through the joy of the Epiphany, the fear of the Holy Family’s exile in Egypt, the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple at Candlemas, the loss and finding of the twelve year old Child in the Temple in Jerusalem, His Baptism in the Jordan, His temptations in the desert, His teachings, His miracles, and now His betrayal, His Passion, His sufferings, and His death. The great work of our salvation was begun on that Holy Night at the moment of our Saviour’s birth. That was the beginning of the story. Now, at the Easter Vigil, on *this* Holy Night, on this ‘truly blessed night,’ the great work of our salvation reaches its glorious finale.

At least eight times the Exultet sings the praises of this night. This is the night when you led your people from slavery; this is the night when the pillar of fire banished the darkness of sin; this is the night when, set apart from sin, we are led to grace; this is the night when Christ broke the prison bars of death; this is the night which is as bright as day; this is the night of grace when we raise a torch so precious; this is the night when heaven is wed to

¹ Written by Placide Cappeau (1808-1877) and set to music by Adolphe Adam (1803-1856).

earth; this is the night when the flame is kept burning until the Morning Star – who is Christ the Lord – arises.

The Church's year began in Advent with the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light' (Is 9:2). Now, on *this* night, the pillar of God's fire bursts upon the darkness of a world shrouded in sin. On *this* night, we are led from the slavery of our concupiscent nature by the One who is Himself the Light of the world (Jn 8:12). On *this* night, a flame is lit that can never be extinguished.

In a world where, sometimes, even the child in the womb is not safe; in a world where it will soon be unsafe simply to grow old or weary; in a world where governments of all persuasions seem to be finding ever new excuses to bring death upon their own peoples; in just such a world, we Christians stand alone in celebrating God's triumph over death. For 'death is not of God's fashioning, and it is not for His pleasure that life ceases to be' (Wis 1:13 Knox trans.) God created life so that it could be lived! The Son of God came into the world so that we 'might have life and have it more abundantly!' (Jn 10:10). And it is through the Sacraments, instituted through the outpouring of blood and water from His pierced side on the Cross, that everlasting life is bestowed upon those who choose to conform themselves to the crucified and risen Christ.

On Christmas night, we celebrated our dear Saviour's birth in a cave in Bethlehem. On *this* night we celebrate the fact that He is the first born from the dead (Col 1:18) now burst forth from that humble cave just outside the city walls of Jerusalem.

On Christmas night, we felt a thrill of hope, and a weary world rejoiced. On *this* night, hope dazzles, and the night is full of gladness.

On Christmas night, there broke a new and glorious morn. On *this* night the Morning Star, who never sets, has shed His light on all humanity!

The appointed theme for this Holy Year of 2025 is hope. Hope does not confound. Rather, it raises the hearts and minds of the members of a fallen race, and gives them a reason to live! Hope is what makes us look up even from the depths of the chaos and wretchedness of this life. It is hope that anchors our souls in heaven, even as we still live out our lives here on earth. Hope is the promise which gives us strength, determination, and courage. Hope is what enables us to sing when all around us are in tears of sorrow.

And it is hope that is given to us on this 'truly blessed night' because Christ has come back from death's domain. This same risen Christ now holds out His hand to take our outstretched hand so that we might be raised to new life with Him.

O holy night! O truly blessed night! 'Let earth be glad, as glory floods her, ablaze with light from her eternal King!'