

Four Advent reflections

These meditations by **Mark Hodgson** were written for carol services over four successive years and may be freely used in Advent worship.

In these dark days: words for a carol service in lockdown

In these dark days, there are little things which irritate us quickly and yet other things which bring us great joy – like a good meal or a sound night’s sleep or a walk in the fresh morning air. On these walks, we purposefully pass the stranger by on the other side and yet, in these odd times, the stranger smiles and thanks us.

People ask how we are and the best we might respond is “I’m OK – I’m not great but I am OK.” Conversely, we may say, “Things are tough,” or, “Not good really.” There are of course many who are in a much worse position than “us”. Even those whose “good meal” has had to be provided by a Food Bank or whose “sound night’s sleep” is courtesy of a homeless charity.

Many of us are keen to return to the normality of worship in the safety of “church” but others are fearful of coming into contact with a deadly virus. Many of us have been parted from loved ones for a long time and have relied on technology (if we can comprehend it) to link together but you cannot hug on Zoom.

That loss of the warmth of the human touch of family and friends is a major part of our current life and yet we are not alone. We are in God’s hands and the severest of privation can be met with faith and hope. As a fellowship of God’s people, we take each day at a time, breathe and take one more step towards the end of this time of insecurity. We gather together over cyberspace and stand collectively beside the cradle as witnesses to the light of God’s love entering the world to shine into the darkest of days. This love is one which shines through us!!

We celebrate in this service in a tradition that goes back over a century. The familiar readings, the predictable words and well-known tunes of the carols, the harmonious anthems envelope us in a cushion of comfort. This comfort stands us on a solid ground which supports us to face the challenge of these depressing days. Even more, we follow in a spiritual tradition that goes back centuries to give us strength, reassurance, confidence and security in the face of all manner of strains and stresses. They will pass and we will return to a form of normality – a life made better by contrast with this time of adversity. But the lessons we have learnt about how to overcome the stresses and strains of living with the virus has given us many wonderful benefits to keep for the future. The current uncertainty and worry shall not overwhelm us for we hold fast to God-given values that nothing and no one can take from us. We are surrounded within and without by God’s infinite love not only at this holy and special Christmas time but throughout our lives.

Finally, we can unite with Julian of Norwich and recite,

“All will be well and all will be well and all manner of things will be well.”

What shall we give to the babe in the manger?

We have heard again the familiar story and witnessed the offering of birthday gifts - of a lamb, of myrrh, of incense or gold. But are these the gifts we should offer for the creator of them all?

Perhaps we have missed the greatest gift of them all, because it was so subtly stated - the gift of God with us – Emmanuel; for this is meaning of the Word made flesh - God choosing to share our poor and vulnerable and humble life. A gift so earth-shattering yet so subtly done that we could very easily skip over it.

What does such a gift prompt in us? What can we give him?

Had we been there, would we have missed the love shining out of that little face as the light of the world, the creator of the world, became one of us? Would we have stood in awe at the sight of darkness being overcome with light? We who know the full tale might still miss the message of the light shining in the world yet not even being remotely intimidated by darkness – even the darkness of a cross - because that love shines beyond death to promise eternal life - a love so amazing and so divine... well, it makes demands of us all.

So, what does such a gift of love prompt in us? What can we give him? What can we give the child in the manger? What can we give the boy in the temple? What can we give the man in the synagogue, the man on the mountain; by the lake; riding into Jerusalem; in the judgement hall; on the cross; in the tomb?!!! Above all, what can we give to the God in the garden – the God who is with us in the then and there and in the here and now. When we survey the wondrous cross - when we survey the marvellous manger, what does such a gift prompt in us? What can we give him? The man – the God - who lay there – who hung there - to be one of us – to live with us - to die for us – in order to give us life everlasting as fellow Children of God, beloved and fair.

So, what does such a gift prompt in us? What can we give him?

We celebrate this birth at this time of year – remembering the birthday and the lead up to it, but what about the other 300 and odd days of this year – the days of every year?!!! God is for life – not just for Christmas. We remember each time we take bread and drink wine together about the sacrifice he made for us - But God is for life – not just for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. We wonder at the resurrection which makes the promise of life eternal something we can behold. But God is for life – not just for Easter.

God is for life. Our life now and our life eternal. We must give our lives in service of the one God who came to be with us – to build the kingdom – to be an acceptable sacrifice, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation set here to love one another as God has loved us and to give praise and service to him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light by showing that light – by showing that love.

So, what does such a gift prompt in us? What can we give him?

Give of our souls, our lives, our all.

Mary – a reflection based on the Magnificat

My soul bursts to sing out that the Lord is great,
my spirit rejoices in my Saviour God,

.... for Jahweh has looked on me - a humble servant - with favour?

Is it true – can it be true?

I am utterly confused!

I have been confused from the day an angel came to speak to me – to ME! - right through to today when I have been told we need to run away quickly to avoid yet another brutal horror of this cruel and senseless world. My husband is not saying why, but dear Joseph looks worried - worried for the three of us.

Oh dear. For the last nine months or so, I have been swept up in a whirlwind of things I simply do not understand. I know the Almighty has done great things for me, and God's Name is holy – we are taught this in the Synagogue. I know I am his humble servant – but just one of many in the Kingdom of Judah - so how on earth will all generations call me blessed from this time onwards?

Is it true – can it be true? I have had a baby, which I know is a miraculous thing but at the same time mundane and oh so ordinary – but that all people will call me blessed? How on earth?

....Maybe I have asked that all wrong – maybe it should be, “How in heaven?”

Is it true – can it be true? That this baby is God – born in a lowly stable – the maker of the heaven and earth made a child in me?

A child for us –

for all of us?

A child with us –

our God with us?

Is it true – can it be true? I don't understand why we have been chosen and lifted up in this way – we are humble folk, just like the shepherds who came the other day. And they were as confused as I am... but their wonder and amazement was genuine for our little boy.

Just now we had more visitors – they were very different - mighty and proud but somehow not conceited – who came with gifts – precious and wonderful but dark and profound at the very same time. They had left their thrones (for they must have been kings – mustn't they?) to come here on a long journey to see us – to see this little child and to give us things of great value - but things that have great meaning too. They are good things and we will treasure them but now those rich men have gone away, I think back to Jerusalem... but perhaps not, and we are left alone... and frightened. Joseph won't tell me why, but I sense his fear.

I wish I could understand! I am still so confused.

Is it true – can it be true?

Oh, perhaps I am not meant to understand this truth – perhaps I am meant to receive these things just like this little baby here with humility and acceptance and trust and love and hope and promise in the mercy of God.

Little boy – are you listening to me? Your wonderful eyes look back at me with such depth – such knowledge and understanding – as though you had been here for all time (or longer) and not just for a few days. I love you so much, my child of God, and yet, somehow, I feel you have so much more love for me – no.... no, not just for me, for the whole world. I just know you will do great things – you would do anything for the world, wouldn't you, little man? Servant King.

Why am I saying all these things? I don't even understand these words or yet know from whence they came!

Oh, Mary, compose yourself! Just rest – be still and let the spirit of God flow through you.

[Pause and breathe in]

My soul bursts to sing out that the Lord is great,
my spirit rejoices in my Saviour God,

for Jahweh has looked on me with favour - a humble servant.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son..... *[suddenly realising]* my son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for evermore.

Amen.

I shout Alleluia... although I do not understand.

Can all this be true?

Christmas 2018

A light to conquer darkness

In the beginning, and before, there was Love, for Love is Eternal and God is Love. In the beginning, the Word of Love created light and saw that it was good.

The creative power of that light - its warmth and its energy - brought life into the world.

That light still shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot comprehend it; cannot grasp it – for darkness is only the absence of Light – the absence of Love - the absence of God.

Though shades of darkness may find a home within us, we are nonetheless created in the image of God, the image of Love, the image of Light. We are created in the image of that Light which came into the world to outshine the darkness of evil in the world. A light which

was heralded by the heavenly light of the messengers of peace and joy. A light which guided travellers to the lowly place where the Light of the world entered the world as a helpless but perfect child – the Son of Love, the Son of God.

In that simple shed in that ancestral town, a Light to conquer darkness came into the world because there was no home for the new family anywhere else. In that humble place, God showed an intimacy with lowliness by coming into the world as one with us - Emmanuel. In the light of that act, indeed in the light of all of the other actions of the Light of the World called Jesus, we can plainly see that “God loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and the broken”*. If, as we are commanded, we are to love God with all our strength and heart and soul and mind, then it follows that we must love all our neighbours, because doing that shows the Love of God – the Love which is God - in action, bringing light into the world – a Light to show the way home.

In this dark corner of the year, the light of Christmas shines out, overpowering the gloom, and we bask in it. But there are others not far from here, almost – nay, in truth - on our doorstep, who can only dream of the warmth of the Light of Christmas. They huddle for shelter in doorways, hoping for a small puddle of light escaping from those lucky insiders to help them to see a way forward. Yet, perhaps that borrowed light only conspires to underline their darkness – the darkness of loneliness – the darkness of homelessness.

We are called in this place always to be a light to the world as the hands, the heart, the people of Jesus – the people of God. We are not here to be a static light – unmoving and unmoved by the plight of those around us. We are called here to be a light which travels – a guiding light, like the star that goes before. A light that responds to the needs of the lost, the lonely, the poor, the bereaved, the ill, the naked, and the homeless – a light which gives them hope, company, assistance, comfort, healing, clothing, and shelter. Our neighbours are the people throughout the world, in this city and on our doorstep who are in need of peace and comfort and shelter.

The good shepherd, Jesus, goes out in search of the lost one to bring them back safe into the fold. We must follow in His way. We must show the Light of the Love of God so that all the children of God may bask in the warmth of God’s presence and in the Light of Love.

*Bonhoeffer

Christmas 2017

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