

December 2024

Bishop Malcolm writes...

The carol 'It came upon a midnight clear' is not my favourite, but two of its lines always jump out at me. The first is the reference to John Milton's 'Paradise Lost' – where Milton's 'wandering steps and slow' in the carol become the 'painful steps and slow' of humanity struggling under 'life's crushing load' along a 'climbing way'.

For many that's just how they will be feeling as this Christmas approaches. Whether it's personal problems, local, national or global politics, whether it's the cruelties of war in Europe, the Middle East, or Africa, or whether it's our painfully slow response to the climate emergency, we feel ill-equipped to face such challenges. None of us as individuals, and none of our national or global institutions – including the church – seem up to the job.

But it's a different line of the carol that intrigues me most, from the first verse of the carol 'the world in solemn stillness lay'. It is that sense of waiting, of longing, longing for a story to be told and a song to be sung that cannot come from inside ourselves, but which, once heard, we find irresistible. Those three words stand out – world – solemn – stillness:

This 'world' – reality as we know it is a planet set in one huge galaxy within an expanding universe 15 billion years old, where against extraordinary odds life came to be, evolving over time to produce humans capable of researching and reflecting on the meaning of existence. It is a world of intricate beauty and variety, nature terrifying in its capacity both for destruction and for renewal. This same real world we know as the place of our human struggle – and it is the world which 'God so loved' that he 'sent his only begotten Son.' (John 3.16) John unfolds the astonishing mystery that the very sense and meaning of this vast universe is fully expressed in the one born in Bethlehem and crucified at Calvary. The Word, the one who gives meaning to it all, made flesh, made accessible, recognisable to us. One of us. One with us.

Solemnity follows. 'The world in solemn stillness lay....' For all the welcome festive jollification of food and drink and presents and merriment, the incarnation of the word of God is serious stuff. Our journey through Advent helps us explore some solemn themes – not least the four last things,



Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. Change the language if we must, but these themes serve as the writing on the wall to much of our way of life. 'Weighed in the balance and found wanting' (Daniel 5.27) is not a text with which to point the finger at others, it stands as a warning to ourselves. We could and should be better than we are. And if the future is to be better, so we must be. The solemn truth is that in Jesus God did not reach out from afar to touch the world to make it better, he became one of us, 'making himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.' (Philippians 2.7) Let's not bypass the solemnity of Advent.

Then, at last, comes 'stillness'. Not a soporific stillness, but the stillness of waiting in anticipation. Alert. This is how we are to await the song of God's love, the song of the angels. It is an uncomfortable waiting, because we know we are not ready. And we know that however much we know already, there is so much more to be discovered, so much more to learn. When I pray, it is when the words and busy thoughts give way to this stillness that I know God is doing what only God can do. On God alone my soul in stillness waits.... (Psalm 62.1)

Rowan Williams writes in his book 'Being Disciples' about how birdwatching is a bit like prayer. A twitcher will watch and wait in stillness for that 'Kingfisher moment' when a glorious flash of blue and orange shoots by. Such are those moments when we begin to see and know and love the God who always sees and knows and loves us. So worth waiting for.

I waited recently not to see a Kingfisher, but a Bittern – rarer still, but spectacular not for its outstanding colours, but for the camouflage that makes it almost invisible amongst the reedbeds. Hiding in plain sight.

Open our eyes, O Lord, that we may see the wonders of your love. Amen.

+ Malcolm Repton