



A number of years ago, when I was working in a creative arts team on the outskirts of London, I received a card which said simply, “Christmas is a Godsend” – a striking ‘take’ on a popular expression, I thought. Will Christmas be a godsend for you this year, or perhaps something to be endured or ‘got through’ with minimal fallout?

In the absence of familiar family rituals, with their subsequent patterns and rhythms, I suspect I will find myself indulging in nostalgic thoughts - “do you remember when.....?”- which could bring a degree of emotional pain. It is, however, pleasurable to re-visit the good memories – to unearth the faded photos, to view the amateurish videos and cine films. Our collective predicament, (if you can call it that), is also an opportunity to scrape off the superfluous Christmas ‘froth’ that has accumulated over the years – to ‘cut to the chase’, so to speak. An extract I read recently from a Celtic Daily Reading suggests we should “dispel the spirit of restlessness and acquisition, and instil the spirit of wonder”.

“Be still and know that I am God”

Take time out to be still and to acknowledge our personal and collective need for God and his redeeming presence in the world. Take time out to search out the Good News and the good news, the beam of light that shines in a dark place. Become attuned to God working his purposes out through us and through others, creating pockets of hope where only despair prevailed before. Take time out to celebrate and wonder. Take time out to reflect on the Advent ‘process’ – the expectant waiting, the appearance and purpose of John the Baptist, preaching repentance and heralding the **“one who will baptize you (not with water, but) with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 3: 16,17).**

“The hopes and fears of all the years.....”

Where have we heard that before? How well do you know your carol lyrics? I know I do bang on about the efficacy of hymn lyrics as a way of expressing (remembering?!) the precepts of the Christian faith. As the communal singing of carols will be severely restricted this year, we are compelled to be listeners rather than participants. What a God-sent opportunity to breathe in the words of the carols, many of which are profound.

I have no doubt that the reader immediately recognized the extract above as part of the first verse of “O Little Town of Bethlehem”. Although getting on for 150 years old – it was written shortly after the American Civil War by the Rector of Holy Trinity Church Philadelphia, who was inspired by his visit to Bethlehem – the words vividly capture the Christian truth that Bethlehem represents/became a meeting place for all our longings, and the chosen place for God’s gracious response in giving us his precious Son Jesus.

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight”

The lyrics of this carol breathe peace and stillness and expectation. They conjure up the atmosphere of watching and waiting for the arrival of the one who will redeem the world. We sense the mystery which engulfs a specific geographical location, and transforms it into a spiritual location. The carol words give expression to the truth that Christmas isn’t Christmas until it happens in your heart.

When you next listen to, or sing, this beautiful carol, inwardly digest the words and the fact that Christmas truly is a GODSEND.

**Here is a place for you Lord Jesus
Just as our hearts have made it ready,
So, make our hearts ready to welcome you.**

**To be born again
Not in a manger
But in us.**

**Make us your Bethlehem,
Where God is personal
And all things and all people
Are made new.
Amen.**

(prayer from Iona)