

Christmas 2018

I Carols by Candlelight

OPENING PRAYER

All-feeling God,

Insults across the dispatch box provoke fake indignation;

Fake indignation insults the homeless man in the Westminster subway
whose death provokes little indignation;

Death threats to British MPs and insults on twitter in turn insult those
truly oppressed and longing for political freedom;

Isolationism insults the poppy-strewn fields of remembrance;

Complacent arms sales insult Yemeni children.

The Church's passive aggression insults the gay.

We are indignant about little things and careless of big things.

It is a bloody mess, enough to make a stone angel weep.

So we come to sing and speak the human mother tongue of prayer. Let
music reach beneath our verbose transactions to stir a deeper part of us.
Through the poetry of faith, God, work on our hearts to deepen our
sympathies, broaden our horizons, ignite our passion and nurture our
hope. Amen.

REFLECTION

A woman went by, I want to say old, but she probably wasn't particularly; a face that is, was, pretty, but her girlish innocence has long since frozen and become brittle as old newspaper. She walked with a stick taking the tiniest steps, a stillness of sorrowful gaze and mouth. Her arms were as thin as can be and clothes neither new nor old, neither neat nor scruffy, almost calculated to be unnoticeable. It was as if it were not any illness that made her steps tiny. It was as though she wanted to disappear, to make as little a mark on this world as possible. She was a person fading away, erasing herself little by little. What

broken heart or loss or hesitation or oppressive parent has led her here? Speculation soon becomes unpleasant voyeurism, so I try to turn the three or four second glimpse of a life, passing a shop door, into a prayer for anyone feeling diminished or tempted to diminish themselves. She is at least out and about. Prayers, then, for those who do not even do that. Some leave so few fingerprints behind.

So I mumbled in a journal a few months ago. “What are human beings that you are mindful of them?” asked the Bible poet. Indeed, we are tiny. But I want the woman to read on and feel the hilarious amazement of being alive and having agency in the world: “yet you count us as little lower than yourself and give us command over so much.” (cf Psalm 8)

Contrast Boris Johnson [I scribbled angrily that same day] lumbering around the place with an unbearable sense of entitlement. What’s the news? He’s resigned and made photo opportunity out of it? No, the big news is not that he has resigned, not that Teresa May’s in trouble. It’s that he is no longer Foreign Secretary, THAT’S the news, thank God.

We could think of any other swaggering leader, or for that matter any self-obsessed objectifier of women, or anyone using power to make others’ lives harder. It’s as if they’ve heard the second half of the psalm about God “putting all things under our feet” and forgotten the first half about our smallness. I want to say “shut up and look at the stars, feel how tiny you are and how absurdly fortunate to be alive, then when your gaze returns to the world you might see it as the gift that it is, not the object that you use.”

We have traced in word and song a parabola from innate human wonder, down to the depths of our dysfunction, pleading God to tear heaven open and sort it all out; then we sang of the insistent generosity that breaks through against the odds. Then when God finally met us in Christ in such a subtle, vulnerable way as to restore our stunted emotional intelligence, we find hope growing again. We’re pointed towards the Kingdom of heaven, where the rich and poor no longer need to resent each other. This historic parabola is not fixed in time. We trace it in this way to get our heads around the continuous reality that longing is at the heart of what it is to be human; dysfunction is always a potential risk of our freedom, but so is the irresistible generosity and startling grace that bubbles up when human beings make themselves vulnerable to God. Imagining that poetic journey we perhaps clear the static

of resentment and shame so as to hear the divine call across the universe to be fully human by helping each other be fully human.

Britain, self-styled for so long as “Great,” if others got to choose the descriptor might today be “greedy,” or “grumpy,” or “lonely old git” Britain. We’re struggling embarrassingly with the obvious fact that we are not the centre of the universe. No one is. What is Britain, what are we, that God should be mindful of us?

In Christ, God came to the edge of the Imperial map and made it the centre. He came to the hidden gynaecological secret place on the edge of male consciousness to make it the glorious life-giving centre. He came to the shitty animal place to make them the centre, helping us re-learn the responsibility towards creation that is humanity’s vocation. He came to the ordinary to make them the centre. He came for the woman who wants to erase herself and leave no mark, to hold her, dignified, at the centre. He came to displace the arrogant and powerful to the edge of the story, but not so as to humiliate them. Indeed some of their overbearing behaviour arises from fear and insecurity. No: stable-born, Christ marginalises them, inviting them to accept their palace, Herodian, White House or Westminster, is not the centre of things. Christ comes, believe it or not, to help Boris and the like precisely by pushing them to the margins where they might be able to see the stars better and start to re-calibrate; where they might find themselves singing “dawn is a-breaking in my soul.” [*the opening carol of the service*] For only finding themselves on the edge might they discover the hilariously liberating wonder that no-one is the centre of the universe. In God’s heart everyone is.

PRAYERS

God, hear the cries, and still us to hear the cries of those overwhelmed by volcanic turbulence and cruel waves.

God, hear the silent pleas, and help us to hear the silent pleas of those who feel they have no place, no influence, and may leave no mark on the world.

God, hear the childishness, help us to hear the childishness of those wielding adult power destructively.

God hear the praise, and help us to join in the praise of those who see you better from the margins. Use their shepherd-joy to judge cynical disengagement, to banish our national self-pity and re-grow our stunted emotional intelligence.

Lead us from insult to laughter,

From resentment to compassion,

From greed to wonder,

From arrogance to humility and from shame to confidence.

For you have shown there is a better way. Amen.

II Midnight Communion

Isaiah 62:6-end

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem,

I have posted sentinels;
all day and all night
they shall never be silent.

You who remind the LORD,
take no rest,

and give him no rest
until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it renowned throughout the earth.

The LORD has sworn by his right hand
and by his mighty arm:

I will not again give your grain
to be food for your enemies,
and foreigners shall not drink the wine
for which you have laboured;
but those who garner it shall eat it
and praise the LORD,
and those who gather it shall drink it
in my holy courts.

Go through, go through the gates,
prepare the way for the people;
build up, build up the highway,
clear it of stones,
lift up an ensign over the peoples.

The LORD has proclaimed
to the end of the earth:

Say to daughter Zion,
'See, your salvation comes;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.'
They shall be called, 'The Holy People,
The Redeemed of the LORD';
and you shall be called, 'Sought Out,
A City Not Forsaken.'

Luke 2:1-20

The people have spoken. They have delivered their decision to government. Voting in larger numbers than usual, we have sent a clear, unequivocal message they must listen to: the message of our yes:no ratio of 17:16 is that as a group, as a country, we definitely cannot make our mind up. So, now it's the civil servants I feel sorry for. They have to do their best to enact the whimsical policy of government or the clumsy attempt to form policy with blunt referenda. They don't get to answer back publicly when criticised. They are quickly blamed for inefficiencies. They often have to deliver bad news. The Archbishop of Canterbury has wistfully observed that Civil Servants need a lot of pastoral care at the moment.

I wasn't much worse for civil servants enacting the Roman Emperor's edict that there should be a census. This was bad news for the people. There were two reasons for the Imperial census: first, to establish by population how much tax the Emperor could exact from occupied lands like far away Israel. As people registered, they knew they were going to get a bill for the privilege of having the Roman Army tramp all over their land, sequester their property and hang rebels on crosses outside their towns. "What have the Romans ever done for us?" the People's Front of Judea might ask.

It gets worse. The second reason for the census is to establish how many young men could be conscripted into the army should there be a war. Imagine the disgust and worry about those two questions way over on the edge of the Roman Empire. While the emperor's face was on every coin, an inscription declaring him to be divine, as they filled in the forms or whatever they did back then, they knew their faces were not known. They were objectified as commodities, sources of income, until deemed expendable in war. But someone had to sit behind the desk, collate the information and report it to Rome. That in between role can't have been easy. But such is the grown up world of government; the adult world of pragmatism; the serious world of death and taxes.

St Luke very clearly in his first three chapters establishes this grown up hierarchy as the context for God to come finally to straighten things out with humanity. There is no doubt who is in charge. With the weight of a tradition of expectation behind him, from Isaiah onwards, predicting God's rescue of a beleaguered, shamed Israel, we read with baited breath to see how God is coming to the rescue. What kind of rescue we might like today will vary according to whether we live in Yemen, Indonesia, Syria, on which side of the wall in Bethlehem we live on, or whether we live here in Britain. Even here, which side of the 17:16 ratio we lean to will nuance our sense of what deliverance would look like.

The bureaucrats in Bethlehem are noting down this little family of Mary, Joseph and a new baby boy. He is objectified in the emperor's "future army expendables" category. That the narrative jerk so suddenly from Imperial bureaucracy to family crisis is touching, not least because we know too well how painfully statistics bellowed across the Commons contain real lives in crisis, individuals damaged by punitive government sanctions and immigration procedures.

Then, arising from family crisis, Luke shows us something startling. God breaks mysteriously into some of the grimmest lives in the neighbourhood, and sends them hurrying to find the

child. “This shall be the sign” said the messenger. Not, “here are some odd clues so when you see them you’ll know it’s the child I’m talking about.” Rather, “this shall be the sign that God is at work, rescuing humanity.” The baby will be wrapped tightly in cloths so it can’t even wriggle or wave it’s arms. This is a sign that, while humanity tries to assert control through hierarchy, God works differently. God comes to live among you and be with you, not to control or coerce you. Coming to listen and share in grimy human life, God is putting a face to his anonymity and showing he attends to our faces. This is the opposite of objectification. Then secondly, “You will find him lying in a manger.” This is a sign that God is here for the healing of all of creation and that God sustains all life, nourishing us, intimate and essential as food. Swaddled in a manger, God declares to all the powers that be, if they will listen, that humility is a divine strength, not a weakness.

One of the most magnificent things about this story is that, before Jesus says a word, it is clear the Shepherds are not entirely intimidated by Rome. They have not had the eagerness knocked out of them. They respond to the message with childish wonder and energy and, finding Jesus, enthuse exuberantly. Luke wants us to consider the serious adult world of dull imperial administration, and the apparently childish world of shepherds hurried talk of angels and ask: who’s really alive here? Who really are the grown ups? Who do we think we are most like? Whimsical emperor wanting his own way; or someone always caught in between other people’s needs, like the poor civil servants; or ready and willing to take what comes so long as we know God is with us like Mary and Joseph; or playful, joyful, energetic like the shepherds going out of their way to forge community with strangers, so declaring the culture of objectification a failure.

Look closer at the lonely figure of the Emperor. His face may be known all over the Mediterranean, but as he objectifies and commodifies the population, he dampens his capacity for relationship. We know objectification leads to cruelty, and must then challenge it vigorously, but it also hardens the heart. It denies our vulnerability and therefore our ability to fall in love. Objectification of pupils as mere numerical results sucks the humanity out of education. Objectification of women or men drains the passion out of sex. Migrants, people of different faiths, political opponents, we can do it to anyone in order to excuse abusive behaviour, then how ugly we become. So we can be sure the emperor’s heart is shrivelling. As he conquers territory, his emotional world shrinks. Look then at the shepherds, how alive they are, how electric their joy. They return rejoicing. Return. Their socio-political status has not changed, yet their world has burst from black and white into full colour because they have some kind of community, open to strangers and especially open to God. They are fully alive and their emotional world is growing. Who looks childish and who looks grown up now, then? Who is alive, and who do we want to be like?

Most of us will not be one of those figures or types, but we learn a bit about ourselves from every literary character we take the trouble to know. While never emperor, we might nonetheless still have an aspect of spoilt child wanting our own way. While not, perhaps likely to be a persecuted minority on the run from deadly powers (although some in our midst do remind us of that reality) we may indeed find our family crises crashing into employer’s demands or other things disrupting our plans, shattering our dreams. As the unbearably pathetic image of new parents making a dint in the hay for their child highlights,

at such times we may find it hard to make room for tenderness. We may not all be bouncy, eager, extrovert and community minded, but we can all choose whether or not to reach out to neighbours. We must understand that some might need particular care, having had the joy battered out of them by circumstance and be harder to lure into community because their trust has been abused. Some may inspire us by their resilient capacity for joy. I suspect quite a few of us at some time in our life will find ourselves like those civil servants, feeling caught in between others' demands and agendas, wondering if we've lost our voice. The emotional spectrum is coloured in beautifully by Luke and helps us understand we're all probably a mixture of such things, and the mixture will shift and change through life.

St Luke suggests God comes in Christ to heighten our perception, so we cannot fail to see each other's humanity, and to lay before us life choices that are there for us every day whatever our worldly status. He is candid, we can choose anonymity. We can choose always to say it's someone else's fault. We can choose bitterness. We can choose to objectify each other and not notice the deadly effect it has on our own hearts. We can choose resentment or thanksgiving; isolation or community; objectification or adoration.

We must pray for those getting lost in the supposedly grown up world, hopelessly trying to respond to the emphatically inconclusive way the British people have spoken. If you know the Life of Brian reference I made earlier, you'll remember a great sequence where the hapless rebels ask what the Romans have ever done for them and in fact they come up with quite a long list. Criticise them, we may, but government matters. Roads matter. Health care matters. What we need is to subvert the presenting adult seriousness of it all with the more playful energy of joy in community. Grown up emperor or childish shepherd? Yes, Lord, give me those shepherds any day.

III Christmas Day

Hebrews 1:1-9

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say,
'You are my Son;
today I have begotten you?'

Or again,
'I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son?'

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,
'Let all God's angels worship him.'

Of the angels he says,
'He makes his angels winds,
and his servants flames of fire.'

But of the Son he says,
'Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever,
and the righteous sceptre is the sceptre of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.'

John 1:1-14

A loyal, compassionate and wise youth worker is beaten up by a bunch of young lads at a bus stop and I want to beat them up, or at least humiliate them publicly, but he's a deeper person than me. He insists this neighbourhood is not defined by those few deluded lads. He refuses to objectify all young people on the basis of that experience. He illustrates with knowing compassion the vulnerability required if we are to forge community and live well together. Reaching out to offer friendship, a helping hand, neighbourliness, always has built into it the risk of rejection and even, on rare occasions like that, attack. This is also the case for a nation such as Germany, opening its border to welcome refugees, one of whom later turns on them and commits some atrocity, fuelling the gleeful anger of racists who say "I told you so." Others feel hurt and betrayed, bewildered that the person they helped has turned on them. We're made to feel foolish for being kind. The wrong person always ends up feeling guilty.

We dwelt last night on the eagerness of shepherds giving them connectivity, contrasted with the objectifying Imperial bureaucracy causing isolation. But we must name the risk of reaching out; the risk of joy.

St John helps us to step back a moment, gaining a bit of cosmic perspective. Everything exists because God **is** and because, it appears, God does not want to **be**... without us. God wants us to **want** to be with God. Otherwise God would simply have made him/herself so obvious we could do nothing but bow and scrape. God chooses vulnerability. Putting a face to God's name, God came in Christ to reveal how God wants to be with us, and wants us to want to be with God. How's that for risking rejection?

The world was made because of God's loving character but some of the world did not recognise this character when he came. Some did recognise him and rejected him. Some did, and took the plunge, meeting his uncanny vulnerability with their own and found themselves feeling at last they belong in this vast universe, as a child knows it belongs when it reaches up and takes a parent's reassuring hand on a walk. From the theoretical, cosmic and philosophical, John is zooming steadily in, worryingly close. Then there is a tender shock with the bodily weight of the word "flesh." The word became flesh. With a shudder, this cosmic theory is now about us and the body we inhabit. Rather than our bodies making us feel different from God, and often vaguely ashamed, God's presence in flesh begins to affirm our fleshliness. What St Luke shows with emblems of swaddling clothes and terrible accommodation, St John shows in the fleshy Word willing to be unrecognised and vulnerable to hurt.

Describing Jesus as the "exact imprint of God's very being," Hebrews then goes on to talk up his humanity. Are you impressed by angels? All that heavenly glamour people are so intimidated by? Like the angelic bling? Indeed, God "makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire." But Christ's humanity is even more glam, more vibrant, more beloved by God, says Hebrews. "He is my Son" says God. It may dawn slowly on us, but the import of that is that all our humanity is affirmed. We are God's daughters and sons. Our impulse for justice reveals we are made of the stuff of God's character.

Even though it is often distorted, our human capacity for justice is a godly vulnerability. To care about strangers' well-being even when we'd prefer not to, to be vulnerable to others' pain: this is what makes another poet reach for the phrase "In God's image, male and female God created them." When a person shows compassion, that is more wondrous than the flaming wings of an angel. We should be more dazzled by the integrity of our youth worker than by the Angel Gabriel.

We will spend the year following the tantalising material we have about Jesus, wondering how much more there might have been. But today Hebrews takes us forward from John's beginning to the ultimate purpose of creation: that God and creatures be at ease with each other; at ease in their otherness, connected by a shared passion that others' suffering be relieved. That parabolic journey from brooding creator to rejected, pierced fleshliness, then exaltation to a heavenly place is the big story. It is the movement and direction of creation.

When in turmoil, because of tsunami or terrorism or tyranny, we feel our relationship with God disrupted, but our very outrage and hurt at suffering, even if flung at God in our distress, is the image of God expressing itself in us. Our capacity for grace and humility is a glimpse of regal divinity. It can be hard to trust at times, but this heavenly direction of creation is unstoppable and irrepressible. God has demonstrated vulnerability with us, so encouraging us to be vulnerable to one another. Flesh can be caressed and it can be beaten. The heart can be delighted and broken. But only in the risk of hurt can joy and love flourish.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” so that when we look around at each other, we cannot fail to behold each other’s humanity. Feeling hyper-aware of our goose-bumped flesh the moment we hear that phrase, we might recoil, as a lover might if touched too intimately, too soon. God’s careful intentional circling to reach the right moment in history meant that Jesus could enter the world in a non-coercive yet glorious way and touch us at the right time. He indwells our humanity, head to toe, heart and mind, breath and flesh. Nothing is embarrassing to God. All that vague, corrosive shame humanity lives with fades away.

Beginning in what felt like a safely theoretical realm, John has plunged deep. Like all the best poets, John has helped God get under our skin.