

***A Season of Song***  
**A series of seasonal meditations from John Rackley**

**Advent Sunday 2020**

*O come O come Immanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.*

Latin 18<sup>th</sup> century based on the early Church Advent Antiphons;  
Translated by John Mason Neale, Anglican priest and hymn-writer  
(*Singing the Faith* 180, Tune: 'Veni Emmanuel')

It is probable that many people will be experiencing the truth of Advent in a deep and profound way this year. It is a season in which darkness and fear cast a shroud over the world with occasional sparks of hope which fascinate the mind and soul.

Lament and longing are the signature emotions of Advent and many know this all too well in 2020. No amount of retail therapy or Celebrity get-aways or Strictly dance-offs can assuage the desire to hold the hand of the one who is the other side of the glass or eternity itself.

Advent becomes a false dawn if it is only a celebration of what is coming. The truth of Advent is that we are in a mess; the familiar landmarks have disappeared and traditional convictions no longer capture the imagination. It is only when this truth lodges deep in our hearts will we be ready to live with faith in the Immanuel and celebrate that hope. For it is upon the people who dwell in darkness that the tender mercy of God dawns.

*"We will not understand the light that shines at Christmas if we remove the black back-drop"*  
- *Malcolm Guite.*

*O come O come Immanuel* reflects the Advent experience of God's Hebrew people in exile. It speaks of isolation, grief, oppression, misery and '*gloomy clouds of night*'. This is the black back-drop of which Guite speaks in the quotation above. The story of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures is dominated by the paradox of belief in a liberating God and the brute facts of lives often deep in conflict and oppression.

The original Christian antiphons used words from the Wisdom Tradition and Prophets to describe a faith in God's future action which can arise in the most trying of circumstances. We are invited to cry out in our worship 'O Lord of might', O Rod of Jesse', O Key of David'. O Day-spring'. But there will be no truth in us if we do not worship as among the afflicted. Each cry provides a pathway into the nature of God's presence as Immanuel. Christian belief mingles with Old Testament story. The hymn moves from the giving of the law on Sinai to the overpowering of death through the Resurrection to the hope of eternal heavenly joy.

We the singers are an exiled people too. We are not at home in this world of death. There is a future beyond the present misery.

I know this is not the most popular of hymns to sing at this season. It is all too easy to jump into an excited anticipation of Christmas and get to the carols early. Let's forget the gloom; let's get in on with a jolly but careful time. But then I look at the faces of the tired-out, the forgotten, the lonely and the fearful and know there is in them a deeper need which cannot be assuaged by a few mince pies, a glass of mulled wine, and 'we wish you a merry Christmas'.

So I conclude with another hymn. It wasn't written for this season and Singing the Faith has given its home in its 'Justice and Peace' selection. It is from Bernadette Farrell, Roman Catholic liturgist and begins:

*Longing for light, we wait in darkness.*

*Longing for truth, we turn to you.*

*Make us your own, your holy people,*

*Light for the world to see.*

*(Singing the Faith 706)*

She writes of a Church which shares the longing of all people for peace, food, shelter, warmth and above all truth. It is full of Advent desire and cries out:

*Christ, be our light!*

*Shine in our hearts.*

*Shine through the darkness.*

*Christ, be our light,*

*Shine in your Church gathered today.*

This is the authentic cry of Advent.

*Prayer:*

God of Advent,  
planted in us is a deep desire for things to be better;  
may any who are feeling overwhelmed by what they cannot resolve  
know the comfort of your presence,  
and may your Church rise through the darkness of uncertainty  
into the bright expanse of your purpose for us all,  
through Jesus, the Immanuel child.  
Amen.