

## ***A Season of Song***

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

**Sunday 20 December 2020 (Advent 4)**

*'Christmas is coming!'  
The church is glad to sing  
and let the Advent candles  
brightly burn in a ring.*

By John L. Bell, Iona Community.  
(*Singing the Faith*, 166)

Advent candles grace our worship and prayer at this season. As each is lit the season advances toward Christmas Day. We are called to remember the Day of the Lord, the prophets of Israel, John the Baptist and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

*Do not fear, today I bring good cheer,  
Jesus Christ, the Saviour now is here,  
God has lit his flame of love,  
Through his Son from Heaven above.  
So let it burn.*

By Clare Stainsby  
*Singing the Faith* 174

This sequence is largely inspired by the stories in the first chapter of Luke's gospel. They are beautifully profound. They shape the carols we sing at Christmas too. Without them, Christmas would not be the same and they are at the heart of our anticipation played out in carol services, school nativities and Christmas cards.

What is it about stories?

Herminia Ibarra suggests that the recipe for an effective lecture is that:

*'They often start with a story from the speaker's personal experience; the story illustrates and motivates the main point a person wants to make. Once the audience is hooked by the story, the main points – the technical or scientific bits – are easier to follow and retain. The talk usually ends with the moral of the personal story, reminding the audience that the message, no matter how mysterious is personal. It's embodied'.*

It sounds like the prescription for a good sermon too. I am intrigued by her word *'embodied'*. When we tell a story, it takes on the nature of the teller; more than that, they also become absorbed by the listener. It is our story. It is a word become flesh; our flesh. Surely this is what has happened to the stories of Advent and Christmas? They belong to us and we belong to them. They give us a sense of identity and our own distinctiveness. They help make sense of our experience and give meaning and significance to our lives.

There was a time when I used to get frustrated at the inaccuracy of the carols and the distortion of the gospel accounts that occurred in Nativity scenes. Now I am not so disturbed about such things. I have come to realise that the birth stories in Matthew and Luke have become glorious myths. What happened is not as important as what's the meaning we give to them now.

They are parables. They carry meaning deeper than their surface reality.

*Of the Father's love begotten  
ere the worlds began to be,  
he is Alpha and Omega,  
he the source, the ending he,  
of the things that are, that have been,  
and that future years shall see,  
evermore and evermore.*

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, 348-413 AD  
(*Singing the Faith*, 181)

*Prayer:*

Story-telling God,  
the stories of Advent are wonderful.  
May that wonder rest deep in our lives  
to strengthen and guide us through  
the pathways we must take today.  
Amen.