

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

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

**Sunday 3 January 2021 (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Christmas)**

*O little town of Bethlehem  
how still we see lie!  
Above them deep and dreamless sleep  
the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
the everlasting light;  
the hopes and fears of all the years  
are met in thee tonight.*

Phillips Brooks, 1868  
(*Singing the Faith*, 213)

*'The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight'*. These words capture my heart each time I sing them. This beautiful carol with either of its two exceptional tunes takes me to the heart of Christmas faith.

There is a lot of fear in the stories of Advent but Christmas brings something different. Zechariah similarly is frightened by the arrival of an angel in the temple. Mary is fearful at hearing the news that Gabriel has for her. The shepherds are told not to be frightened by their celestial visitor. In fact, Luke tells us that they are terrified. What all these stories have in common is the fear caused by disturbance.

The routine of Temple ritual is disturbed. A young woman maybe dreaming of a future child with her betrothed suddenly finds it's already happening. A typical night among the sheep is overwhelmed by something that removes the shroud of darkness.

2020 has been a year of frightening disturbance. I'm not just talking of what has happened to us in this land. As I wrote those words the huge blast that destroyed lives and the harbour in Beirut came to mind. How quickly such terrible events just become a news item from a review of the year. But for those involved the terror lives on... as does grief, loss of work, unremarked anniversaries and cancelled visits.

Fear indeed stalks humankind in many forms and the pretty little village seemingly undisturbed under silent stars knows it well.

There is no hiding from fear. It will arise unbidden. It is natural enough. But so are hopes. We are equally capable of hope.

Zechariah might have hoped for a successful sequence of services as lead priest. Mary would probably have hoped for a long and fulfilled life with Joseph. The shepherds would have hoped for a good price for lamb. We will have hopes for 2021 too.

There will always be times when fear will arise but will there also be a hope born of the grace of God resting deeper than the power of fear?

*O holy child of Bethlehem,  
descend to us we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in;  
Be born in us today!*

And should that be as disturbing as an interrupted service or an unexpected experience of new life or a challenge to the usual way of things then maybe we should consider this could well be the work of God and not an inconvenience. And it will always be for our good...

*In a byre near Bethlehem  
passed by many a wandering stranger  
the most precious Word of Life  
was heard gurgling in a manger,  
for the good of us all.*

*And he's here when we call him,  
bringing health, love and laughter,  
to life now and ever after,  
for the good of us all.*

John L Bell and Graham Maule  
(*Singing the Faith*, 324)

*Prayer:*

God with us now,  
you know we get consumed by fear  
and the New Year will bring more challenges which we will have to cope with.  
Help us to trust you with our fears and discover the growing life of Christ deep in souls.  
May we and all your people on earth spread signs of your bright glory in the places where  
we live for the sake of the Saviour of the World – the Child of Bethlehem, Jesus.  
Amen.