

Reflections and Prayers for Advent – Struggling and Rejoicing

This is the 38th in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

Struggling

This final edition of Reflections for 2020 is intended to span the 4th week of Advent and Christmas: it's a little longer than usual. It begins and ends at Bethlehem – literally the place of bread and of royal King David a thousand years before the birth of Jesus: a modest place with one claim to fame about to get another, even greater. In his 1868 carol Phillips Brooks (an American clergyman), having just been there, has it 'still' and 'dreamless': if it ever was, it certainly isn't now, as recent alternative versions of the words boldly indicate, such as Wendy Ross-Barker's which begin, 'O sad and troubled Bethlehem we hear your longing cry'. Such was the disconnect between the carol's sentiments and the reality on the ground that an Anglican vicar in Dorset banned its singing in his churches a few years ago.

Bethlehem today is, above all, a place of struggle, as Richard Vautreay explains in the first piece below. But its fame arose because it was the scene of a struggle to find a place where a heavily pregnant young woman might give birth; it was a struggle to get there at all, allegedly to satisfy Roman demographic demands via a census ('why do we have to go to Bethlehem?!?!', 'come on, you know what these Romans are like, but we'll find a nice Premier Inn'); then, in the absence of a nice Premier Inn, it was a struggle to find any lodgings at all; finally, who knows, a struggle to give birth – potentially hazardous at the best of times – in the most uncongenial, inhospitable surroundings.

But Mary's was perhaps not only a physical struggle: was she still coming to terms with the overwhelming importance of the role bestowed on her? To bear the son of God, the Messiah, the saviour of the world.....it hardly bears thinking about. There is something very special about Mary which some churches elevate and others barely acknowledge: fast forward 30 years or so to Calvary where she suffered a mother's worst possible nightmare experience in the most cruel, humiliating circumstances. This was surely far beyond struggle; it was utterly heart-breaking.

If we associate our ideas of struggle with darkness, they contrast with the hope and light to which we aspire in this season of Advent and Christmas as Elizabeth Holmes reflects in the second piece. With hope and light, struggling can give way to rejoicing.

In the third piece, Hannah Langford's meditation is a topical interpretation of the whole story of the birth of Jesus as it unfolds, beginning with the earlier Advent themes of hoping and waiting, leading us to Bethlehem and the eternal light of the world.



John Bell, December 2020. Wendy Ross-Barker is a local preacher in the Sankey Valley Circuit of the Liverpool District: her version of 'O little town of Bethlehem' can be found via internet. Photo provided by Hannah Langford.

Candle of Bethlehem for faith

I've been fortunate enough to visit Bethlehem on a couple of occasions. The first was as a tourist, or some might say a pilgrim. We were on the standard route, travelling with ease from Jerusalem, just a few miles to the north and after visiting all the sights, heading off to the Dead Sea and up the Jordan valley to Nazareth and Galilee. We visited the Church of Nativity in Manger Square, which looks more like a fortress than a church, and entered through the small doorway to join the crowds looking for the traditional site of that stable behind the inn. To be honest, it didn't feel that spiritual and it was more like being a tourist than a pilgrim.

15 years later I returned, but this time it was very different. The crowds of tourists were nowhere to be seen. The souvenir shops, packed with wooden carvings, pots and decorated plates were empty of people other than the shopkeeper, keen for me to buy something that was “authentically made in Bethlehem” and “not from China”, as the loss of trade was devastating for his business. The Church of Nativity was as solid-looking as it has been for centuries but this time there were no crowds milling around inside, and it was easier to have time to look into the place said to be the stable that was the first resting place for a baby.



And then there was the wall. The tall concrete slabs erected around this small town cutting it off from the area around it, zig-zagging like a giant snake strangling its prey, blocking the route towards Jerusalem and providing a visible statement on a daily basis that those on the wrong side were feared by those on the other side. I watched as those lucky enough to have a job in Jerusalem gathered earlier in the morning to go through the daily indignity of passing through the checkpoint in the separation barrier on the way to work.

This is an ancient town that has lived through centuries of challenge, hardship, conflict, oppression and injustice. And yet throughout it all, and perhaps because of this, the prophets kept faith. They signalled that this insignificant place would “bring forth for me one who is to rule in Israel” (Micah 5.2). It’s a town that needs our prayers, it’s a town that needs us to keep faith with it and its people.

Dr Richard Vautrey, December 2020. Richard is a GP in Leeds and a former Vice-President of the Methodist Conference. Photo of part of the wall from a website illustrating life in Bethlehem.

Advent Candles – Light in the Darkness

I recently heard the TV personality Kirstie Allsopp, best known as a co-presenter of Channel 4 property shows, suggesting that we should all put lights in our windows for Christmas. And to do it NOW, to lighten up the dark days we all find ourselves in.

It has indeed been a dark year for so many of us. Winter in the northern hemisphere is dreary enough in normal times, but the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic has made things much worse. Yet religious faiths have always sought ways to bring light into the dark days. The Hindu festival of Diwali and the Jewish Hannukkah are both festivals of light. In its own way, that’s what Christmas is too.



As I write I have no idea whether we will be able to be back worshipping in church in any way before Christmas. One of the things I will miss is the build-up to Christmas through the days of preparation of Advent, through the lighting of the Advent candles each week, seeing the light grow as more candles are lit, until the final burst of light with the central candle on Christmas Day. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great Light”.

There are various traditions surrounding the symbolism of the candles on the Advent Ring, but my favourite is that they stand for peace, hope, joy and love. My first recollection of the tradition dates back many years, to while I was still at school. I went to a carol service in German and English organised by the Anglo-Austrian Society in the newly consecrated Coventry Cathedral. As John Bell mentioned recently, Coventry had been very badly bombed during WW2; the old cathedral had been hit by an incendiary bomb and burnt to the ground. But the new cathedral, built right next to the burnt-out ruins of the old, stood as a symbol of hope and reconciliation. So lighting a candle for peace in a service shared by people whose nations had so recently been at war with each other, took on special significance.

Today it seems to me that we need not just peace, but hope and joy and love, more than ever before. Those values are at the heart of the Christmas message; we can know peace in our hearts and in our community, hope for the future, the love of God shared among us and between us, and deep-seated joy, all because of that tiny baby lying in a manger – Jesus, God’s own presence with us here on earth, a light in our darkness.

Elizabeth Holmes, November 2020. Elizabeth is a member of Frodsham Methodist Church and a local preacher in the North Cheshire Circuit. Photo from BBC of Diwali candles.

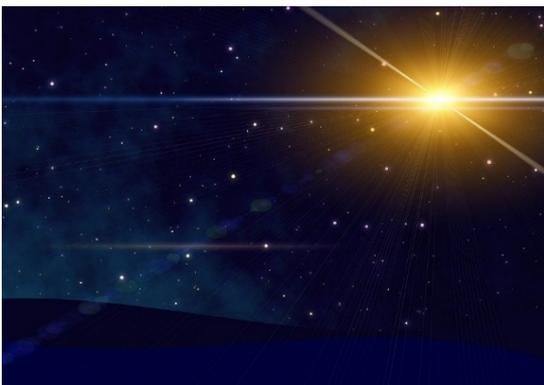
Advent

This year we are waiting,
This year we are hoping,
Daring to dream of a world beyond the virus,
Approaching Advent with a different type of yearning,
A heightened sense of searching,
For the baby who will bring joy into our world.

This year and every year,
We remember the story,
Of a baby wrapped in cloths and lying amongst the straw.

We remember the story of Mary and Joseph,
Frightened, tested, yet resolute,
Following God’s plan and not counting the personal cost,
Journeying on a donkey,
Not to a place of comfort,
But to a stable, rustic and bare,
Nevertheless, remaining faithful,
And holding the hope for humankind in their arms.

We remember the story of the shepherds,
Hearing the news from the angels,
Starting out afraid, then being filled with wonder and joy,
Summoning the courage to set out on their journey,
A pilgrimage to meet the light of the world,
A mere baby, yet one who would save us all from sin, darkness and despair.



We remember the wise men who came later, guided by the stars,
Who pondered and discovered the meaning of it all.
They too went to worship the baby Jesus,
With treasures from afar,
Knowing the significance of that very same baby,
Not just on that Christmas Day all those years ago,
But for you and for me,
This Advent and always.

So, this year, whether you are in a bubble or outside one,
Whether you are working on the frontline,
Or whether you are doing your bit from home,
Amongst your neighbours, family and friends,
By wearing a mask, washing your hands and (only physically) staying apart,
Know that the Christ Child is drawing near to you and to me,
Remember the true meaning of Christmas
And hold it close.

Hold onto the baby at the heart of Christmas,
Treasure those you love – whether in the flesh or via the telephone and Zoom
And hold onto the hope of that same, ever-radiant light,
Represented by the baby Jesus all those years ago,
The flame that cannot be extinguished,
That will, if you let it, illuminate our darkness,
Our world,
Now and forever.

Hannah Langford, November 2020. Hannah, a non-practising solicitor, is a member of Knutsford Methodist Church in Cheshire and she also provided the photo.

Reality 2020

As faithful Christians we anticipate the rejoicing which Christmas can bring, though this year tinged with the daily struggles that many people endure. As I draft this in an almost empty hotel in North Yorkshire (in tier 2), Joan and I are the only diners in what would normally have been a busy and bustling breakfast time, with all tables occupied: alas not, as the photo shows, for it is eerily quiet. In some sectors of the economy, not least hospitality, unemployment and redundancies are soaring: people will struggle to celebrate Christmas, to make ends meet, to find new work – well, there's not a lot of it about, is there? To the north in Tees Valley, County Durham and all points as far as Berwick-upon-Tweed, restaurants, pubs and cafes would be firmly shut, some probably padlocked across the doors or shutters down. A bleak prospect indeed, and that's before mentioning the shambles of Brexit.



People are denied the opportunity to do what they have always done at this time of the year: many will struggle to cope with not being able to meet family and friends or even, if they can be in church, not to burst forth while favourite carols are played. There will be emotional and physical struggles, as there were for Mary.

Last Sunday, we celebrated Holy Communion at Norley for the first time in nine months, news of which I shared with Emeritus Bishop Robert Solomon in Singapore (who has contributed to these Reflections). He thoughtfully observed in response that such is the length of a normal pregnancy: in that poignant, life-giving moment of sharing once again, we prayed, 'refashion us in your image that we may be found ready at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Methodist Worship Book p 126).

During this Advent time we have reflected on hoping, longing and waiting for better days: meanwhile do we struggle and rejoice in equal measure as Christmas beckons?

John Bell, December 2020. Photo by Joan Bell: there would normally be more tables too, but they are now suitably distanced.

Fourth Liturgy for Advent and for Christmas

Clear shining light, Mary's child,
Your face lights up our way;
Light of the world, Mary's child,
Dawn on our darkened day.

From Luke 1: 30-31: And the angel said to Mary, 'Behold, you will conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus'. And from John 1: 5: The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Geoffrey Ainger's wonderful hymn keeps reminding us that Jesus is Mary's child, ever was and ever will be, as it sweeps through his birth, life, death and present kingdom, but leaves no doubt that it is he, and not she, who is the saviour and light of the world.



What are your images of Christmas? There are two, united by the above verse, which are this year's final photos. The first is of a baby, Rowan, born in Chester in November, and reproduced with his parents' kind permission. Hannah Langford, in her piece, spoke of 'a heightened sense of searching for a baby who will bring joy into our world': Rowan will surely bring joy and light into his family's world at this time. We too look for sources of joy in these strange times.

The second is of Norley Methodist Church (taken by Joan a few days ago), floodlit from the inside in ever-changing colours, to proclaim to all who pass by something of the light of Christ. It is a symbolic reminder that we are still here, celebrating Christmas as best we can.



In preparation for prayer, you may wish to light a candle.

God of light and life, whose coming into the world we prepare to celebrate again, we give thanks for the faithfulness of Mary, mother of Jesus, and above all, for the gift of Jesus himself.

We pray especially at this time for those who are struggling physically and emotionally as a result of the impact of the coronavirus; we remember friends who have lost loved ones during the year, for whom Christmas would have been hard enough this year but may now be denied the love and comfort of family around them.

We pause in silence and think of them: may they know God's peace.

We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep as we approach a New Year of continued uncertainty and ask God's blessing upon us all. Amen.

John Bell, December 2020. The hymn is by Geoffrey Ainger (StF 193, R&S 188).

Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at belljohna@btinternet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced as far as possible from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymnbook (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P or even the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book – MHB), and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.