

December 2018

Dear Friends

Christmas is filled with familiar words and music, many of which put pictures into our minds. Whether it's the 'little town of Bethlehem' lying still in the winter cold, the 'herald angels' singing their socks off, Good King Wenceslas and his trusty servant crunching through the snow to take meat, wine and pine logs to the 'poor man' or just the picture of the stable where 'the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head' - the images are sometimes almost technicolour in their vividness. I must confess, though, that there is one image that, for me, overpowers them all.

The moment I most eagerly anticipate as the Christmas services begin is the one where I first read, or hear, the words from the first chapter of John's gospel. The image may not be a technicolour one but it is, to me, much more potent. *'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'* A pinpoint of light, surrounded by inky blackness. A light that will simply never go away, because the darkness cannot become even darker and swallow the light up. The darkness can do nothing about it.

The Christian story tells us that the light, the image of God, was there from before time itself. It 'lived on earth and dwelled among us' for about 33 years, 2 000 years ago, and it lives still in any soul that is receptive to its message. At Christmas we mark the start of that 33 years - when God was born in human form, not as a great king or a person of great wealth, but as the son of a peasant girl. He was born in what, to his mother, was an unfamiliar place far from home. There's a wonderful song by the late, great, Jake Thackray called *'Remember Bethlehem'* which, to my mind, contains some very special images of its own. It tells of the 'shabby little country girl' who was 'awfully weak' after having given birth. And the last verse and chorus go:

*When she looked at the child for the very first time
I suppose that she smiled, and it's my guess that Mary cried a little.
So long ago. It seems so far away, so far away.
But even so I've got the flesh and the blood to remember them by:
Him in my mind and her in my eye,
And every reason why I Remember Bethlehem.*

Into the darkness of that place that was usually a home for animals came not just a baby but 'the light'. It may have been long ago and far away, but it remains as vivid as the night when it happened. So as you prepare for Christmas and begin to hear (and maybe to sing) the good old carols once again it's worth just taking a step back and holding that quiet, bright image in your mind. 'Him in your mind and her in your eye.' Remember Bethlehem - and give thanks for the light that continues to shine in a dark world, a world that, still, cannot overcome it.

May you have a light-filled Christmas and the happiest of new years.

With my love and prayers, as ever

Mark