

The meaning of Christmas in a hymn

Michael Whitfield recently sent me some Advent studies that he had written and was using with a church group on the Isle of Wight. So, when Viv and I made a short Advent retreat, we used his studies as our spiritual discipline. Here is a summary of the mix of Michael's and our thinking that emerged.

The studies are based on the well-known Christmas hymn 'O little town of Bethlehem', written in 1868 by the American minister Phillips Brooks a few years after he visited Bethlehem. Brooks wrote it as a carol for his church's Sunday School Christmas service and asked his organist, Lewis Redner, to set it to music. What struck us was how good was Brooks knowledge of the Bible and grasp of theology.

Verse 1

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy 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.

Yet in thy dark streets

The stage is set for the meeting of heaven with earth: the little town of Bethlehem. Picture the innocence of a primary school nativity play; see the freshly-laundered tea-towel gracing many a head; hear the angelic voices in every quarter; and think again!

In the Hebrew scriptures Bethlehem gets a mixed review. It is mentioned as being the home town of a victim of gang rape (Judges 19) and close to the grave of Jacob's wife Rachel (Genesis 48). It is also where Ruth, the economic migrant, met and married Boaz, and subsequently came to be the great-grandparents of David, the shepherd-boy come king. Bethlehem (meaning 'house of bread') was a refuge for religiously 'unclean' (and therefore low-life) shepherds who were unwelcome in sophisticated Jerusalem, 6 miles up the road.

So it was not just the streets that were dark; hopes and fears went back many years. No less so today, as Bethlehem is part of the Palestinian territories, separated from Jerusalem by the illegal Israeli West Bank wall, visited by both tourists and terrorists. Yet, it was Bethlehem that the prophet Micah, addressing further dark times of impending exile, foresaw as the birthplace of a new shepherd-king, one who would meet the yearnings of the common people (a messiah perhaps), one about whom John would later write, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). Heaven, it seems, comes to earth in the most down-to-earth of places.

Verse 2

O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
and peace to men on earth.
For Christ is born of Mary;
and gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.

at the end of the verse. But could they include the shadowy figure known as the satan, described in Isaiah 14:12 as 'Day Star, son of Dawn'? Or even (in a curiously out-of-body experience) a time-less Jesus, the one who announces himself as "the son of David, the bright morning star" at the end of time in that most difficult book of all, Revelation (22:16)?

Verse 1 of the hymn proved to be a challenge to simplistic ideas of purity. Here we have very different possible identities of the morning stars. So why could the answer not be: all of the them? Perhaps the hymn-writer has the vision to see that everyone and everything, from the beginning to the end of time, from the unquestionably good to the misleading distortions of good, would welcome one who brings peace and reconciliation. It is a relief to think that the incarnation is "good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10), that, like the shepherds on the hillside, we need not be afraid, or concerned about whether we qualify for God's grace.

Verse 3

How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven:
no ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still,
the dear Christ enters in.

characterises the ministry of the adult Jesus, starting in up-country Galilee among weak, ill and marginalised people.) God comes quietly to earth.

Until, that is, a choir of angels burst upon the sheep pasture above Bethlehem. So how can Brook write that no ear will hear his coming?

The morning stars

Who are these 'morning stars' who enthusiastically announce the birth of the Christ-child? Searching the scriptures raises as many questions as answers. Are they the heavenly host who, according to Job 38:7, witnessed the very dawn of creation? This is the implication of the reference to unsleeping angels

A silent gift

There is a multi-faceted 'silence' with which the Christ-child is wondrously given to the world: the lack of the usual fanfare given to royalty; the humble circumstances of a hitherto unknown teenager giving birth in less than palatial surroundings. (The same *modus operandi*

The meaning hinges on the phrase 'having the ear' of a person, as this is used when the person whose ear it is has important status. The angels have the ear of the shepherds; but why bother with them? Because that is God's way.

What, then, does it take for us to hear his coming? The implication is that the meek souls who will receive him are those with a silent quality to their lives, those who can avoid the distractions of making a noise or being a 'big noise', and be open to God's silent gift.

Verse 4

O Holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell:
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord, Immanuel.

Our Lord Emmanuel

The final verse bridges the distant past with the present and future. Immanuel (or Emmanuel in Matthew 1:23) means 'God with us' and the study invites us to see the sweep of God's revelation illustrated in several Bible passages: the hopeful sign of the pregnant woman in Isaiah 7:14, given significance in the

Christmas story in Matthew 1:23; the assertion that, long before, Christ was involved in the very creation of the world (John 1) and with us throughout the future (Matthew 28:20); and the recognition of this by Simeon (Luke 2:30) and the magi (Matthew 2:2).

If 'God with us' has been true in history, how is it, or could it be, true for us today? We are invited to consider what we are expecting when we sing, "be born in us today." And what experiences can we share of knowing 'God with us'? I could think of instances, particularly in my one-to-one work with people, of being aware of a silent wisdom beyond my own usual abilities, guiding me for the benefit of others. I wonder how you would answer.

Peter Henderson