

Christmas — 25th December 2024

'Christmas — things both old & new'



(All Saints, Margaret Street, north wall Nativity scene.)

A very important part of Advent & Christmas, for me, is the wonderful and strong English tradition of Christmas carols: so many and varied carols and hymns that have been written down the ages in honour of the birth of Christ. I think of my dear Grandad, an accomplished pianist, playing the piano for us at home, each Christmas, so that we could sing together. I have been to some lovely Carol Services and concerts this Advent — *I think, about six!* — and the thing that I always really enjoy on such occasions is hearing *new carols*, Advent and Christmas music that

I've not ever heard before. I was very lucky on Sunday to be at a 'Nine Lessons & Carols' Service near here, at the beautiful High-Anglican church of All Saints, Margaret Street — it's a church designed along the lines of the Oxford Movement, in which St John Henry Newman, our patron, was a leading light, though by the time that the church was completed (c. 1859) Newman was already a Catholic. At their service on Sunday, I was thrilled to hear not one, but *five*, carols that were new to me! Here's one which struck me very much; the 20th-c. words are very simple, but rather moving:

Small wonder the star, small wonder the light,
The angels in chorus, the shepherds in fright;
But stable and manger for God — no small wonder!

Small wonder the kings, small wonder they bore
The gold and the incense, the myrrh to adore;
But God gives His life on a cross — no small wonder!

Small wonder the love, small wonder the grace,
The power, the glory, the light of His face;
But all to redeem my poor heart — no small wonder!

The power of this, and so many carols, I think, is the stark reminder they bring that the Nativity is a thing of such

great (mind-blowing!) wonder, that God should choose to do this, to become incarnate in this fashion, in such *poverty, vulnerability and exquisite personal love*: not so much the magnificent gestures — angels, stars, Magi — as the smallest gestures which are the *personal* ones for each of our souls. It makes the Nativity both supremely attractive, and at the same time an awesome mystery that some just feel they have to dismiss as mythical for they cannot believe that God would actually act in this way — *no small wonder!*

The fact that Christmas abides in the hearts and homes of so many, in some way, however, is a testimony to that fact that Christmas — precisely as the Nativity of the Son of God — cannot be lightly dismissed. I was in a Japanese restaurant the other evening, and the bathrooms had piped music, but it was actually proper Christian Christmas carols, not just some souped-up so-called Christmassy music. I know that many people will indeed take the festivities with only a very small dose of Christian

practice, but the fact of the matter is, that one cannot take “Christ” out of “Christmas,” even in its semi-secular form.

We, of course, would want all those who claim to keep Christmas to do so as a devout adoration of the Christ child, as we hope to, ourselves, but I think we should accept that God’s own surprising entry into history itself has a power and attractiveness that still works wonders and keeps the Lord Jesus, His love and His divinity, before the eyes of the world. It is too amazing to be false; it is too awesome to be dreamt up by our imaginations. We should constantly reach out to others with the truth of God’s incarnational mystery: God became man, for us, for our salvation, in all the humility and simplicity and suffering that that entailed. Do not underestimate the power of the Christmas event to draw others to the Christ-child, “the babe, the Son of Mary.”

In the midst of this awe-filled mystery — the gaze of the world drawn somehow, anyhow, to Bethlehem, to Mary, and to Jesus — we open the ancient doors onto another new venture today, the Holy Door of St Peter’s,

opened last night by Pope Francis, the Holy Door of the Holy Year 2025. The Church keeps ‘jubilee’ years, or Holy Years, every 25 years (’00, ’25, ’50, ’75 of each century), plus the ’33 and ’83 years (every 50 yrs after the Crucifixion (33AD), and occasionally extraordinary Holy Years in addition. The jubilee year is chance to re-focus one’s spiritual life, to re-consider the very purpose of the years of life passing, and to ‘take a pilgrimage’ whether in reality as a physical journey to e.g. Rome, and to the holy sites of the Catholic and apostolic faith, or whether a pilgrimage of the heart. Every Holy Year is in some sense a re-invigoration of Christian hope, but this one has that as its very theme: ‘Pilgrims of Hope.’ Every new life is a new sign of hope, and so to combine the joyous birth of the baby Son of God — the hope of new life that exceeds all other — with the opening of a ‘Holy Year of Hope’ makes perfect sense.

Maybe we have many fears, many questions about the year to come — personal, moral, political, global — no doubt Mary & Joseph did, too, that Christmas night of the

sacred birth of Jesus. And yet they could sense, in that moment too, the real birth of a new God-given hope, founded on the flesh-and-blood presence of the Word Incarnate, lying there before them in the hay of the manger. They could know that the whole world could have hope, and make sense, only in Him: this tiny new-born, given in to their care to protect and nurture. And we can too. Let us allow Christmas to flow in to the Holy Year as 2024 makes way for 2025. Let the Christmas spirit of joy and hope, of heightened sensitivities to the spiritual and mystical — God’s mystery touching our world in a way that is inexplicable except as infinite, divine love — sustain us as we open our hearts to 2025 not just as ‘any old new year,’ but precisely as a Holy Year that we will explicitly keep as a *holy year* in our lives of faith. Whatever anxieties or issues press on our hearts at the turn of the year, may the sense of a jubilee year — a sacred time of amnesty from overriding secular concerns — give us relief, and a strong, tangible sense of ‘letting go and letting God.’ No amount of our own worrying can of itself solve

the world's problems and the personal dilemmas. If we insulate ourselves from the hope that pours forth from God, from the Crib and from the Cross, then we will never arrive at the spiritual calm that we so desire, and need. How much we need a 'Jubilee Year of Hope'! Let's take on board, this Christmas, the beginnings of the Holy Year, in our hearts. Let's set to give the Lord something new and special in 2025; let's make it a year when we draw closer to Him. Where better to begin, than on our knees today at the Crib, adoring the Christ child, and offering to that innocent babe, the Son of God, the son of Mary, starting today, a new and utterly committed heart of love ... for Him and for our fellow man.

[Here is a passage I came across recently, and which sums up our Nativity devotion this holy Christmas morning ...]

