

Sunday 28th December 2013

St Barnabas, E17

Christmas One – Bethlehem

Here are some alternative words to a well-known carol:

(<http://www.waja3ras.com/2008/12/alternative-christmas-carols.html>)

**O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and restless sleep,
A missile glideth by.
And over dark streets soundeth the mortar's deadly roar,
While children weep in shallow sleep
For friends who are no more.**

**O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
A curfew's laid where children played -
Now only tanks roll by.
And in their homes sit starving
Thy people; and they say:
"One man from us blew up a bus;
Why must the whole town pay?"**

**How ruthlessly, how ruthlessly
The F16s bombard!
What God imparts to human hearts
This arrogance so hard?**

**They terrorise a people -
A war-crime and a sin;
However tall they build their wall,
Revenge can still get in.**

(last verse at the end).

When I first heard those words, I was outraged. How dare anyone change the words of one of the best loved Christmas carols I thought! Worse still, how dare anyone change the words of that carol, such a gentle lullaby, such a comforting hushaby carol at Christmas time, such a necessary escape from the rush of Christmas, such a welcome opportunity to switch off from all our troubles and the troubles of the world and be lulled into sleep!

We needn't worry too much. The words are temporary words which were written to highlight the plight of those living in Bethlehem, officially under Palestinian jurisdiction, but terrorised by the might of the Israeli state. This year large crowds, including tourists, gathered in manger square in Bethlehem, but just a few years ago the Israeli authorities effectively cancelled Christmas in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was "still", but for very different reasons from those in the mind of the Victorian author of the Christmas carol. This

year people were able to cross from Jerusalem to Bethlehem but to do so they had to undergo security checks through one of only three gates opened in the huge wall Israel has built to separate itself from Bethlehem. As with other parts of the Palestinian Authority, Israel controls all access to Bethlehem, access to all utilities, access to all food, medical and other supplies. Tourists would have experienced more relaxed measures but the wall that separates Palestine from Israel is one where Palestinians crossing it daily are subject to exhaustive and humiliating security checks as they live under a virtual apartheid.

This year, as other years, we sang Christmas carols from the hymn sheets produced by the charity *Embrace the Middle East* (formerly known as *Bible Lands*). This charity works to highlight the plight of people living in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Israel/Palestine, where it supports various charities seeking to provide some hope in the midst of those troubled countries. For example, it supports *Refuge*, a charity providing comfort, medical help and education to refugees who have crossed from Syria into Egypt, this at a time when Egypt itself is in political turmoil. This region, the land of the Bible, is in a political mess with Israel's continuing persecution of the Palestinians, with Lebanon and Egypt undergoing national crises, and Syria with a one of the worst

humanitarian catastrophes of recent times, with over 100,000 dead and millions displaced missing or dead since the start of its civil war.

I spent a year of my life living in the next room and sharing a kitchen with a trainee priest from Nazareth, the wonderful Yazeed Said. He taught me to make Arabic coffee, falafel and Arabic salad. After we both ordained, he was, for a time, the Acting Dean of St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem and he sent me a Christmas message then with these words, "The more you live in this land the more you can see how such biblical dramas appear in the context of this land's struggle. We have come to see that in the midst of darkness, of loss, and destruction, God appears."

"How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given." How easily we are offended by someone changing those lovely words, especially to "How ruthlessly, how ruthlessly the F16s bombard"! On one level we do not want to be pointed to pain and suffering this Christmas, even in the land of the Bible, especially in Bethlehem. On one level, we are easily attracted to the cosy, peaceful image of Christmas presented by the Victorian hymn-writer.

It's extraordinary in a way that the original words of *O Little Town of Bethlehem* ever took hold. "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given." Whoever heard of a woman giving birth in silence? And yet that is the image of Christmas with which we are so often comfortable, that people look to the church to present them at Christmas. What's desired is a serene Mary and a baby - "no crying he makes" - lying silently in the manger. The crib is a popular, comforting image at Christmas. But what possible comfort is the first Christmas if it was completely devoid of the pain of childbirth and of a baby who cried? How can a birth, a mother and a baby bearing no resemblance to human reality - beautiful as it may be to sing about - be a gift to the human condition?

It isn't so much that the image of a restless Bethlehem takes us away from the first Christmas, rather it points us precisely to what the first Christmas was really like. It points us to the horrific account in today's gospel of what happened in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth: *'When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet*

Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." It is not a cheerful message. Not one we particularly want to hear just after Christmas – it is unwelcome news – unwelcome news like the typhoon in the Philippines, unwelcome news like the conflict in South Sudan, unwelcome news like the storms that have left many in this country without electricity, unwelcome news like our own personal tragedies and losses- – and yet there it is in the gospel for today. We cannot ignore it. Just as turning off the TV will not make the bad news away, so closing our Bibles on this disturbing Christmas story of the massacred innocents will not deflect from the fact that this story of innocent suffering in there in the Bible.

And it is there precisely because Jesus was born not into the picturesque world of the Victorian Christmas card, nor into the world where a cute Christmas is a desirable consumer choice, nor even into the cosy world where we choose to cut ourselves off from the reality of a hurting world – but because Jesus was born into a time of political unrest, tyrannical leadership and horrifying stories of innocent suffering. It was the real world into which Jesus was born in Bethlehem and the comfort of Christmas

precisely that Jesus was born into this world and came to transform it.

To quote Yazeed once more: “We have come to see that in the midst of darkness, of loss and destruction, God appears.” That is why the church persists in Bethlehem, even in the midst of such difficult circumstances. That is why the plight of Christians in the Bible lands matters so very much. That is why none of us can lose hope even in the midst of the terrible suffering we witness in today’s Bible lands. That is why we may well want to make a permanent change to the last verse of that popular carol and replace it with the last verse of the alternative version with which I began:

**O promised child of Bethlehem,
Tear down the iron cage,
The walls of hate that separate
And harden and enrage;
Bring justice and make equal;
Come down from far above;
And come to birth upon this earth,
As hope and peace and love.**

Steven Saxby, December 2013.