

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
RESOURCES FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTION

19th December 2020

Dear Friends,

During this time of lockdown, we are sharing resources for prayer, poetry, music and reflection. Please feel free to send us any that you like.

For the weeks of Advent we are including a set of reflections prepared by members of our ministry team. Our reflection this week is from Reader Jane Quarmby.

1 Advent 2020

Every evening at dusk, I head up to the barn to give our sheep their evening feed and to shut them in for the night. They eat, as animals have done for millennia, from a manger, in a barn with a thick carpet of golden straw. Often I will perch on a straw bale in the fading light, with our young bearded collie and quite often one of the cats and listen to the silence. A barn or stable at night is a very peaceful place, the animals safe inside from wolves and other predators, settling into the warmth and the dry. There's no jostling for a place as they settle down for the night.

In this time of Advent, as we look forward to the coming of the baby who is to save the world, I often think of that stable 2000 years ago and wonder what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph. To our modern eyes, to give birth in a stable seems perhaps a dreadful thing to have to go through, in a place built for animals with none of the medical help we in the West now have in hospitals. For the young mother, far from home without her own mother, or aunt or perhaps an older sister to help with the birth, it must have been frightening. She has already endured a long journey on a donkey to get there, heavily pregnant. To arrive in Bethlehem and find that the place is full to bursting point with other travellers, and no room anywhere in an inn or a house, must have been the final straw. Joseph too must have been anxious about his young wife.

We probably nowadays don't think the offer of a place in a stable, rather than a room in a house, was very kind, given Mary's condition. But it may not have been a thoughtless and grudging offer from a harassed inn keeper with an inn bursting at the seams with people coming and going, noisy and shouting for food and drink, with

Roman soldiers making the rounds. At least in the stable the young couple were alone, out of the hectic chaos. They were in probably the warmest place, dry, and secluded. Being far from home, they were forced to rely on their own resources. Joseph probably had to deliver the child, unless a kindly woman traveller had volunteered. We'll never know, but I like to think that as he helped the baby to arrive, he formed a bond with the child and his young wife that would stand the test of time.

This Christmas, many of us will be forced back onto our own resources too, as many of us will be spending Christmas alone or in very small groups, unable to celebrate with wider family and friends. It's not a matter of a turkey for Christmas, more a quail perhaps. We may not be far from home, but many people are. This will be a Christmas vastly different from others, as we miss being with others, of enjoying meals and time together. It will be a more sombre time as we grieve for those we have lost, or worry about loved ones who are ill, or are struggling financially. We too may be ill, or struggling with loss of income, struggling to make a Christmas dinner or buy presents for children.

But as I sit in my barn, with the animals breathing and the stars coming out, I keep going back to that baby born in a stable, with parents who lived in a dangerous and uncertain world. They had very little, apart from the gift of a beautiful baby boy. Others would come with expensive gifts, some just to see him. The first to come were shepherds, poor men leaving their precious flocks of sheep to come and see this child, lying in a manger, of whom so much had been foretold. It didn't matter that they had nothing to give him. It didn't matter that Joseph and Mary were far from home, they had enough and more. As do we – Christmas is not about presents and trees and tinsel and parties. It's about that quiet, calm stable, heated by the warmth of the animals in there, and a tiny newborn baby, come to save us all. And if we think that we have nothing left to give or that our efforts are too small to be counted, remember the tabby cat in the stable who purred to lull the crying baby to sleep. Mary drew the letter M on the little cat's forehead – and to this day, all tabby cats bear the mark of Mary.

Jane Quarmby, Reader

2 Prayers

Lord God,
In generous love
you flood our failures and fears
with the gift of your life poured out for us.
Living in the pull of your love,
release us to respond with
the full breadth of our lives
in mind and heart, body and spirit.
Amen.

Gracious Lord,
open my heart
to receive the gift of your Son.

Loving God,
help me to know your love for me,
as your child -
welcomed and accepted.

Gentle God,
make me vulnerable to the world,
for the healing of others.

Amen.

3 Online resources

Clare Amos continues to publish reflections on the Lectionary readings through the weeks of Advent on the website Faith in Europe:

<https://faithineurope.net/2020/12/03/advent-1-walk-us-into-the-wilderness/>

4 Poetry

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands

Malcolm Guite, *O Emmanuel*

And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me ?

And is it true ? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissued fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single Truth compare -
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in Bread and Wine.

from Christmas, John Betjeman

5 Sacred Music

How far is't to Bethlehem? (English traditional carol)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHox5SucFYw>

Of the Father's heart begotten (Piae Cantiones, arr. David Willcocks)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pt75zI4kz6g>

May the peace and the hope of Christ be with you always, this Christmas and beyond.

With every blessing,

The Revd Jamie Johnston
Chaplain