

An advent reflection – Waiting in the Darkness

In 1994, Graham Kendrick released an album of Christmas music. The title track, Rumours of Angels, is a lament. The chorus says:

“And the years of our sorrow have rolled on and on,
and the wars of our pride never cease.
We have ravaged the earth with our envy and greed
tell me, when will we welcome His peace?
When will we welcome His peace?”

Graham Kendrick © 1994 Make Way Music

“That’s not very ‘Christmassy,’” you might be thinking! I agree. But that’s ok.

I’ve been reflecting (admittedly, a little grumpily) on the move for people to decorate their homes with flashing lights and trees earlier and earlier. We have a neighbour who each year has their Christmas tree in their window on the day after Remembrance Sunday, and typically now we see what we call “house bling” (showy, garish external lights) on many houses near us from late November.

I can’t help feeling a little sad, because I know from observation and conversation that many of these will be coming down on Boxing Day. It does seem to me that the desire to generate a “Christmassy feeling” is all about building up to the “Big Day,” which probably peaks as the presents are opened (and the food and drink consumed). I don’t want to deprive them of their joy in bright lights and tinsel. I can understand that with gloomy news and darker evenings, people want to brighten things up – I do too. Yet it does seem to be an entirely secular festival for which they are preparing, not the celebration of the birth of a Baby in Bethlehem. And that does make me sad.

Perhaps this is too cynical. What do you think?

What might be the “antidote” to the rush towards Christmas?

I hope that the answer is clear. I’m not one for banning Christmas carols until after December 25th (although that is the tradition in some parts of the Christian Church.) In the last week or two of Advent, I love singing some of the old Christmas classics. I do, however, think it is very important that we keep Advent well.

I am increasingly convinced that we need to spend time waiting in the pre-Christmas darkness. The anticipation of Christmas will help us to welcome the Christ-child more deeply, more authentically.

Mary and Joseph took time to prepare for their child: so should we. The opening chapters of the Gospels point us towards the rich and deep meaning of this birth and link us to ancient prophecies of God’s rescue plan that would be fulfilled with the Child, born of a virgin, wrapped in swaddling bands and laid in a manger. It took time.

The shepherds were out on the dark hillsides, watching over their flocks before the angels broke into the still and silent night, bringing them news of great joy, and filling the sky with light and the air with beautiful song. Suddenly, from nothing, the news broke.

To a nation and a world waiting for the Messiah, came the news, unexpectedly. I believe it was that switch being flipped from “not yet” to “now” that made the events even greater,

causing the shepherds to abandon their night watch to rush into the town to find out what had happened, and then joyfully tell others.

Might this be a pattern for us too? Isn't there something that we might learn about waiting for the joy of Christmas instead of going into full Santa-and-fairy-lights mode even before Advent Sunday?

If you ask me what is my favourite part of the Bible, I am most likely to caution against having favourite parts, because all of Scripture is God-breathed and useful... But press me a little, and I would have to admit that every year the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stand up when I read, or hear read, the prologue to John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth."

Here I see a waiting, a build-up, with a crescendo as the Word finally takes on human form and is revealed to us.

I can't wait for Christmas. But I will.

My prayer for you all is that you know afresh the joy and excitement of Christmas and the Christ-child, and peace and fulfilment in the year ahead.

Steve Faber
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