

Midnight 2014

Everything was quiet; everywhere was the faint crackling silence of winter night. We started singing and we were all moved by the words and the sudden trueness of our voices. Pure, and very clear and breathless we sang 'As Joseph was a-walking he heard an angel sing,' and 2000 Christmases became real to us then; the houses, the halls and the places of paradise had all been visited, the stars were bright to guide the kings through the snow; and across the farmyard we could hear the beasts in their stalls. We were given roast apples and hot mince pies; in our nostrils were spices like myrrh and in our wooden box as we headed for the village were golden gifts for all.

So wrote Laurie Lee.

And here, this night, despite the lack of farmyard noises, despite the full pubs and the traffic on the roads, there is that wonderful sense of stillness, of expectancy, when all that is ordinary, all that is humdrum takes on a new beauty like a scene transformed by white sparkling frost. No matter that the icy brilliance will thaw into dull grey and brown. The transformation is real.

And so it is that on such a night as this we can almost hear the singing of angels, and our hearts are radiant with unaccustomed love, and for a moment the everyday struggle of life is transformed.

But is it just for now, this moment?

By tomorrow will we be so engrossed in preparations, greeting relations, that it is forgotten, pushed back to a tiny corner of the memory to be resurrected next year?

Even Mary and Joseph were not always lit by a holy radiance. That night, 2000 years ago, when they were worn out by the worry and pain of a birth with no midwife to help, and roused themselves from their exhaustion and cleared up the mess, how far removed from the promise of glory it must have seemed. The message of the angels pushed out of their mind by the pressure of the present trouble.

As peace began to settle again, and Mary marvelled at the perfection of her new-born Son, wild shepherds, breathless and awkward stumbled through the door.

Their eyes still held the wonder and the brightness of the angels, and as Mary and Joseph looked, they **knew**, their son, so small, so perfect, so inconvenient, was indeed God's hope for the world.

Unlikely agents of transformation, those shepherds. It is as though all who have once been touched by frost keep the power to change all that they touch with sparkling ice. But this is no frost, but the touch of heaven.

The barrier between heaven and earth was pierced at Christ's birth.

At Christmas we get a glimpse into the Peace of God. At Christ's death it was as though the barrier were ripped.

But it is only at moments such as this, when we come in search, that we are aware of our longing for the peace of heaven.

Each Christmas, for over 2000 years, the story has been retold. Yet on this night, this holy night, refugees huddle in fear and cold near the borders of Syria. Somewhere, perhaps just a road or two away, a child lies in bed listening to a violent row downstairs. The Prince of peace had a hard time being born. Peace has a hard time growing.

Christ was born into the world on this night all those years ago, but for peace to grow he has to be born in you and in me.

To all the guests at the inn, Jesus was just another baby, to be dismissed or cooed over. To those that had felt the touch of heaven, he was the Son of God. And they that saw and understood went back to their fields or their work as changed men and women. Of course, at times, their memory of that heavenly encounter would be obscured by day-to-day troubles. But at other times, such was the power of that change that all who met them also felt touched, however briefly, by heaven.

There is pain and struggle this midnight. If we turn our backs, they are the pain and struggle of death and despair. If we take the peace of Christ into the darkness, they become the pain and struggle of birth, the birth of love. Love to be born in us. Love to be set free to transform not just our lives, but the world.

We can feel the transforming power of God this night, that feeling that lifts our hearts or causes an unexplained tear to come to the eyes. In a few weeks time, unless we are lucky and a rough shepherd or modern equivalent burst into our life with eyes shining with wonder of God, we could dismiss the feelings as Christmas sentiment.

Or, maybe this year, perhaps we could cherish this moment, nurture it, allow it to grow to term. Allow Christ to be born in us and break loose from our possession, that the whole earth may know the birth of justice, peace and love.

That is the gift God offers us. Himself. And He is here, waiting for us to accept Him.

May love be born in us this night that all we touch may be transformed with the power of heaven and may you all have a very happy Christmas.
Amen.