

Carol Service 2020

St. Brandon's

Isaiah 9: 2, 6-7; John 1: 1-14

20 December 2020

'... the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight'. It's strange how words that are so familiar suddenly jump off the page (or the screen – although I'm not sure things do jump off a screen in quite the same way! Discuss – but not now!), but they jump off the page at you when circumstances change. Familiarity breeds, if not contempt, then indifference, as can happen in our close relationships, of course! (Discuss – but not now!) And we need something to wake us out of that indifference.

I don't know how many times I've sung 'O little town of Bethlehem' (although I do know precisely how many times I've hummed it), but these particular words from the carol perhaps focus what we've all been going through in this year of the pandemic – fears, some realised, of catching it and the health consequences; fears, some realised, of the loss of friends or family; fears, some realised, of the effect on jobs and livelihoods; fears, some realised, for families forced uncomfortably, sometimes violently, together during lockdowns; and fears perhaps yet to be realised for the future and the long-term consequences.

But also hopes, in the immediate term hope for the successful roll-out of vaccines, of course; hope that we might in a few months' time get our lives back to some kind of normality; hope that relationships with family and friends can be restored; hope that we can 'build back better' in so many ways.

But perhaps one of the benefits of being faced with hopes and fears on such an immediate and visceral level, is that it may have helped to crystallise for us other hopes and fears that we have, but do not normally name – the hopes and fears of all the years. (Discuss – but not now!)

I think I had taken that line from the carol to mean that our hopes and fears would meet each other, and somehow battle it out for supremacy. Hope over fear; fear over hope. But on reflection, I think there's a different way of reading it, and it's in the genius of the word 'met'. We sometimes use 'met' when we think of a challenge or an expectation; we met it, we overcame it, we fulfilled it. So, perhaps, with our hopes – are hopes are met, realised, fulfilled. But we also use 'met' when we think of facing or confronting things. So, perhaps, with our fears – our fears are met, faced, confronted. '... the hopes and fears of all the years are met', but in different ways.

But, of course, the carol then goes on to say 'met in thee tonight'. It's not entirely clear what 'thee' refers to. The verse, as you'll know, runs like this: 'Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight'. Does 'thee' refer to Bethlehem and its dark streets, or to the everlasting light? Or perhaps to both, for it was, of course, to Bethlehem's dark streets that the everlasting light had come that night. And so the carol makes the extraordinary claim that the hopes and fears of all the years are met in the everlasting (even beyond all the years) light, the everlasting light that came to Bethlehem's dark streets on that night two thousand years ago.

The prologue of St John's gospel also, of course, refers to that everlasting light: 'The light shines in the darkness', it says, the darkness of Bethlehem's streets, the darkness of our world, 'and the

darkness has not overcome it'. But then it begins to make this light personal in itself and for each of us: 'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world'. There's a person who is the everlasting light and who enlightens each of us. It's no longer impersonal or abstract.

And Isaiah similarly prophecies: 'the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined ... For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given'. The person who is the everlasting light comes as a child, a son.

And the carol draws on these, of course, to further personalise the claim. If we run part of verse 1 and the beginning of verse 2 together we get this: 'Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. For Christ is born of Mary'. The child is born to us, the son is given to us. Christ is born of Mary.

We may be able to relate to Isaiah's prophecy in a way that we haven't before, as a people who are living in a land, a world, of deep darkness at the moment. But it is into that world that Christ, the everlasting light, was coming, and has come. It is into that world that Christ, the everlasting light, which the darkness has not, and does not, and will not overcome, was coming, and has come. It is into that world that Christ, the everlasting light which enlightens everyone, was coming, and has come.

And it is on this and through this, and in the end *only* on this and through this, that all our hopes and fears can and will be met.

Amen