

3<sup>rd</sup> January 2021

A new year has begun.  
Let us leave behind all that is past,  
and walk together into the future.  
Let us trust in the God of new  
beginnings,  
and worship the God of fresh hopes.

Lord of our journeys, help us this day  
to have eyes to see your leading,  
ears to hear your guidance, and a heart of courage,  
that we may journey faithfully and find your way –  
even when the path may seem difficult and dark. **Amen.**

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When a young unmarried couple  
tried to find a place to stay,  
then a Middle-Eastern village  
had no space, 'No, not today.'  
Mary's pregnancy was clear.  
'Go away! There's no room here!'

Labour pains forced urgent action:  
any shelter now till dawn!  
In a shed to house the livestock  
Mary's baby then was born —  
nowhere for the child to lay  
but a feeding trough with hay.

Such undignified beginnings  
for a child — no matter who —  
yet this is the baby Jesus,  
God's own Son! It's strange, but true:  
our God comes among the poor  
bringing hope for evermore.

**Isaiah 60:1-6**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

There is rich mystery in the story of the wise men. What seems remarkable is that our tradition holds they came from different kingdoms or tribes each bringing their own understanding, their own wisdom, their own gifts and seemingly cooperating fully with one another and not arguing on the journey about whether they were going the right way!

Many years ago, I led an Advent course at the Mount prison. Each week we looked at a different character from the story of the birth of Jesus: Mary, Joseph, Angels, Shepherds and Wise scholarly foreigners. The story of those magi led to King Herod

Songs that paint a cosy Christmas  
miss the truth of God above!  
See how God, rejected, homeless,  
came a child with wide-eyed love.  
Love transforms and brings release!  
Love brings justice, joy and peace!

Here's good news: our God is with us,  
friend for life, in joy and need!  
In rejection, pain and trouble  
Jesus is our Friend in deed.  
Baby child and dying Friend,  
living Lord: love without end.

*Peter Relf (b. 1944)*  
Reproduced from *Singing the Faith Electronic*  
*Words Edition, number 220*  
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(tune *Irby* i.e. *Once in Royal David's city*)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8pgHoskBcQ>

which led to the Massacre of the Innocents which led to horror and disbelief from some of the residents. In amongst the sanitised version of the birth of Jesus they had never heard what happened next:

### **Matthew 2:13-18**

The men at the prison Advent course needed proof from me that this was in the Bible. Then came the slow realisation – as one of them said, ‘this still happens today’ Generations are wiped out; children are killed; whole villages of people are wiped off the map and out of their rightful future There are innocent victims and grieving parents seeking solace. There are people fleeing for their lives.

Holman Hunt’s striking painting depicts the holy family escaping to Egypt as King Herod kills all the first-born males or ‘innocents’ in Bethlehem. These victims could be considered to be the very first Christian martyrs. They are shown accompanying Mary, Joseph and Jesus and presented as safe and well. Why are they there? Are they real or imagined? Jesus sees them and points them out to Mary. Hunt said he wanted the bubbles, or globes which also accompany the procession, to convey a sense of the waves of the streams of eternal life.



*The Triumph of the Innocents: William Holman Hunt*

The Holy family were asylum seekers – where did they stay? Who helped them? How did they cope? When did they return home?

Asylum seekers still travel from place to place seeking refuge. Some don’t survive the journey. Some never return home. Some come to our shores. What is our attitude to them?

What happened next is a question I’ve often pondered in the light of the wise men who, seemingly, had to return to their old kingdoms and their old ways. Herod, who I’m sure believed he had the loudest and most authoritative voice in that particular place, had commanded them to return to him with news of the child. God, via a dream, with a quiet almost secretive voice, asked something different of them and they were sufficiently discerning and responsive to that voice to obey and to travel a different and possibly riskier way. Did they return unchanged? What did they tell people about their journey and who they had found? Were people interested or did they just say politely ‘that’s nice’ and carry on with their everyday lives? Did the men ever know more about the life (and death) of this child they had journeyed so far to find? Did they ever go on any further journeys/pilgrimages (actual or spiritual)? What effect did their quest have on the rest of their lives?

As we journey into the new year we almost certainly do so with some fear and trepidation, many questions and few answers. One thing that is certain is that we journey to the future not to the past and that we will be changed by our experiences. My prayer is that we may journey together, supporting and encouraging one another, being open to new experiences and changes of route and the quiet voice of God who inspires us on this journey to worship him, shows the way in the unexpected and strange and leads us to the place where we, along with shepherds and angels may meet with the living God. **Amen.**

Gracious God:

to all dreaming of a better world, give courage;  
to all dreaming of an end to violence, give peace;  
to all dreaming of freedom, give patience;  
to all guided by the star of compassion, give resources;  
to all guided by the fear of loss, give trust;  
to all guided by the need to be busy, give rest;  
to all led by the need to be powerful, give humility;  
to all led by the longing to draw closer to you, give encouragement;  
to all led to your table, give yourself.

To all people, and to all creation, give your love. **Amen.**

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Unto us a boy is born!  
King of all creation,  
came he to a world forlorn,  
the Lord of every nation.

Now may Mary's son, who came  
so long ago to love us,  
lead us all with hearts aflame  
unto the joys above us.

Cradled in a stall was he  
with sleepy cows and asses;  
but the very beasts could see  
that he all folk surpasses.

Omega and Alpha he!  
Let the organ thunder,  
while the choir with peals of glee  
now rends the air asunder

Herod then with fear was filled:  
'A prince,' he said, 'in Jewry!'  
All the little boys he killed  
at Bethlem in his fury.

*Percy Dearmer (1867–1936)*  
*Reproduced from Singing the Faith Electronic*  
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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7wkg110Y-o>

Bring us, bright God from yesterday  
into today and tomorrow.  
Cheer us with courage.  
Disturb us with justice.  
Safeguard us with wisdom.  
Bless us with wonder.  
Cherish us with love. **Amen**

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