

Archbishops address at Carol Service

*at the Anglican Cathedral Southwark
16th December 2005*

Some weeks ago I went to the exhibition of paintings by Samuel Palmer at the British Museum. Samuel Palmer was a nineteenth century Romantic painter, a religious man, a friend of William Blake. His religious faith comes across in his painting in much the same way as we find in Romantic poets – a sense, a vision of the presence of the transcendent in the world. In Palmer's paintings this is conveyed especially by the use of light; the sun, bright moons, clear white clouds, are all used to suggest that the world and the people in it are involved with a reality that lies beyond the world and which is a source of light and blessing.

The sky figures very significantly in the Christmas story. The men from the East follow a star that guides them to the place where the Saviour has been born. The shepherds see angels in the sky singing "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to men who enjoy God's favour." The Christmas story invites us to look beyond our present situation, beyond the conflicts and tragedies of the world, and of our own personal worlds, and to open ourselves to the light of Christ, to permit ourselves to enter into the hope that is integral to the story of Christmas.

Needless to say, many who celebrate Christmas do not see it as a celebration of the birth of the Son of God, the birth of their personal Saviour. Something I often hear from people of other religions who come to England is that people here seem to have forgotten their Christian faith and lost their spiritual bearings. They find a spiritual vacuum which they see as a loss of profound cultural identity. I would suggest, though, that for many people in our society Christian faith has not been explicitly rejected. Rather people live in detachment from it, perhaps not seeing its relevance to their lives, perhaps indifferent, perhaps seeing it as incompatible with being and living in the modern, scientific world. But Christmas can draw us back, can make people doubt their unbelief.

Some years ago, the present Pope wrote an "Introduction to Christianity" in which he said that any Christian living today will experience doubt about their faith. The doubts and questions about religious faith cannot but impinge upon the minds of people who live in our culture. But he also said that those who give up on faith cannot but have doubts about their position, too. There are so many questions arising in the human heart and the human spirit that will lie unanswered. So, doubts about Christian faith seem to breed doubts about unbelief and agnosticism. And Christmas may not be the best time for trying to figure it all out intellectually. Sometimes the television and the newspapers will

provide us with articles and programmes that seek either to make sense of faith or to make sense of atheism. What I think is important at Christmas is to allow ourselves to be led by openness, by a sense of wonder and by our capacity for hope – hope which springs eternal in the human breast.

In the year 2000, I went to another exhibition of paintings at the National Gallery. It was one of the few millennium events that was explicitly Christian. The then curator of the National Gallery put together some key works of art that explored and expressed the central mystery of Christian faith, namely, the person of Jesus Christ. It was quite a small exhibition and – on the day I went – quite crowded. As I jostled with the other people looking at the pictures, I was wondering at what level people were engaging with them. For some, including myself, faith was being nourished. But I also sensed ambivalence, detachment and unease round about me. I seem to remember that the exhibition catalogue said that because of the breakdown of faith we have lost the language and symbols that once expressed the deep human realities of guilt and forgiveness, of faith and of hope.

Christmas is, I suggest, a time for allowing those realities to surface and for allowing the Christmas story to foster and interpret them. The birth of a child opens us up to mystery. As a bishop, I've met thousands of people on my visits to parishes and I'm always very moved when I meet a young couple with a new baby. Obviously they are very proud but I also suspect that a new sense of wonder has entered their lives. At Christmas we have the opportunity to allow the birth of a child to reawaken our sense of wonder. It's possible, of course, to repress our capacity for wonder, for hope and for faith in the living God. Indeed, in a secular culture, there are pressures to do that at all sorts of levels. Yet, all over the country, children are busily practising for Nativity plays - practising to be Mary or Joseph, or angels or shepherds. I suggest that we, too, are invited to take our place near the crib, near the Christ child and to recognise that that is our true home. It's where we belong. It's where our star is leading us. Let us not be afraid to go there with our gifts and to be open to the gift that awaits us there.

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