

DEADLY CHRISTMAS

I've lost count of the people who have said *"Let's hope this Yew Year is better than 2016."*

I've said it myself and meant it.

Let's hope that 2017 is indeed better than 2016.

The thing about a new year is that stuff from the old year still carries on into the new.

One of these grim realities is the Syrian catastrophe.

The bells chiming on the 1st of January 2017 didn't solve all the problems facing the Syrian people.

Because of the conflict there 50% of all people in that country are displaced, 5 million are now refugees.

Syrians want to stay in their own homes and communities but so many now have made the horrible choice that it's safer to risk a perilous sea crossing, to live in a refugee camp, to be uprooted from what they know and love, than to stay where their children may not survive another day.

Of these people most have sought asylum in neighbouring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Only 10% have tried to reach Europe or further.

Even now countries around the world are still working out whether (or how) to accept Syrian refugees.

The UK has agreed to accept some refugees, but less than many of the other EU countries around us. There are also concerns that we are not nearly on track to reach the target anyway.

Of the 900 refugees we did take in, 600 have been placed in Scotland.

And lets place one more fact alongside this one.

Just before Christmas (in November) 80% of self-identifying evangelical Christians in USA voted for a man who said the US should take in no Syrian refugees.

"Those that are here now should be sent back."

They might *"hurt our way of life"* Guardian 21 September

And now we are at this particular Sunday when we take a look at the awkward bit in the story of Jesus' birth – the bit that never fits in to the kid's nativities.

It's the bit about the bad King.

It's the bit about King Herod, who sets himself up against Jesus so much that he is determined to destroy him.

This is the king who embarks on the massacre of the innocents – who is willing to kill anyone (including innocent babies) in order to look after his own interests.

And it's the bit when Jesus and his parents have to flee for their lives – who take to the road and find themselves homeless and on the run. Jesus has hardly been born and already he is a refugee.

Last year I came across this quote, but I don't know who it was that said it. Anyway, here's the line...

"I'm looking forward to six weeks of the world celebrating the anniversary of a family of Middle Eastern asylum seekers successfully getting away from an evil regime. Ironic, isn't it?"

So in a played-down part of the Christmas story we have got:
a blood-thirsty ruler,
innocent people being killed as "collateral damage".
folk having to run to another country to find asylum.
Sound familiar?

Given that many scholars nowadays believe that the Holy Family's route to Egypt probably involved them taking a boat part of the way, we've even got....
desperate asylum families crossing the Med.
How up to date is that!!!!

It's a horrible bit of the Christmas story to be sure but I'm glad about this 'bad' bit – not for the badness but for the fact that Jesus has come into the **real** world where there really is badness and trouble and where everything is not cute and sanitised like we see in the Christmas cards.

If the whole story of Jesus birth is about picturesque stables, well-behaved animals, unexpected shepherd visitors with cuddly lambs, and then pulling in some wise men from Matthew's gospel into one big party night, then it's all more 'fairy tale' than 'real world'.

For Jesus to be one of us and in order for him to be able to help us he's got to know the real world with all its problems, difficulties and darkness.

So in a way it's good that we have this deadly side to Christmas. It shows us that God cares about the real world and the reality of people's lives.

Thank God that Jesus and his family were accepted into Egypt. But was it all plain sailing?

Could it be that the treatment and innuendo they experienced and were subjected to helped shape Jesus into who he became?
Could this be one of the defining moments in Jesus' life that helped him to have empathy with others who were treated badly or victims of discrimination?

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were received in Egypt. They were given their asylum, thank God.

Had they been turned away there would have been no Jesus. But although they were received in Egypt, were they **warmly** received?

Was everybody glad to see and welcome them?

Here's a question I imagine few of us have ever asked.

When Mary and Joseph and Jesus were living in Egypt how did they get on?

Were they given a great welcome?

That's highly unlikely. Asylum seekers always face opposition from some.

As they and other refugees arrive, their Egyptian neighbours and officials surely complain about "those people" who dress differently, observe a different religion, shop for special hard-to-find foods, have strange holidays, don't understand or respect local customs. That carpenter is going to take someone else's job. They need to learn our language!

Listen to what a minister called Melissa Sevier says about this.

I find it probable that these early life experiences, and the stories recounted by his parents, help to shape Jesus' later ministry to the people on the margins – those who are set aside or who by illness or race are ostracized.

We see him warmly accepting people from other places, religions, and races. He eats with them, laughs with them, and welcomes the outsider. This is true incarnation.

The incarnation holds many levels of meaning for the person of faith.

When we find ourselves at the pinnacle of Christmas joy, we experience Jesus as a boy delighting in every new discovery.

When we know difficulty, illness, or loss, we experience Jesus as one who knew deep suffering.

When we wonder who cares about all the forgotten people, we experience Jesus as a young boy whose family was forced to flee an evil regime to survive.

(Contemplative Viewfinder: Melissa Bene Sevier, Jesus the Refugee 26/12/2016)

For all of his life on earth Jesus had to find a way to cope with the darkness around him.

What are **we** going to do?

What are we going to do with darkness in the world around **us**?

Well we need to do what Jesus did

and the prophets of God before him did

and what the people of God have always done - when they were in tune with God – pick a side.

Interesting that when we see the ugly side of racism become more prevalent that we also see increases of support and donations to those who fight against it.

We live in a world with many divides.

Sometimes we have to make a stand and decide whose side we are going to be on.

That song "*Broken Town of Bethlehem*" describes the dilemma.

The carol "*It came upon the midnight clear*" has an answer. Look at the last verse.

*For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet bards foretold,
when, with the ever-rolling years,
still dawns the Age of Gold,
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendours fling,
and all the world give back the song
which now the angels sing.*

It's very poetic language of course.

It talks about the dawning of the "age of gold".
And that's the age where peace is at last found in the world,
where things are as they should be,
where things happen according to God's will –
where we treat one another with love and respect

It was hoped for 2000 years ago.
As Melissa Sevier notes, it was hoped for in 1849 by a guy called Edmund Sears,
because that was the year he wrote the song,
and of course many still hope for it today.

But it won't come to pass—ever—until and unless *we echo back* the song of the angels – the messengers.
Until and unless we are willing to be people who do more than *hope* for peace.
Until and unless we are willing to be people who *make* peace.

Making peace, building peace, fostering peace. It's all hard work.
But it is the work we are called to do.
The programme is set down for us. It's the work and the values of Jesus.

You know that there are some Christians out there who seem pretty unsure about the work and the mission of Jesus.
There are those who think that all we need to do is believe in Jesus and our sins will be forgiven, and we go to heaven.

It's as if, on the one hand, they are saying Jesus is the most important person ever, but on the other hand, they're not actually going to pay any attention to who he was and what he said, and what he did, and what he taught, and what his life was all about.

What Jesus asked people to do was to “Follow him”.
That’s what he said again and again and again.

That was his call to the people he encountered. **Follow me.** Live my way.
Embrace my concerns.
Be part of my movement to make this world better.

Of course we have to believe in Jesus because we won’t follow someone we don’t
believe in, but the following is the deeper thing.
It’s the following that makes a difference.

As we walk out of worship and into a world that is anything but peaceful,
let us determine to echo back the song of peace and justice by making it happen
in the places where we are.

And let us take courage too, because the message of Christ’s birth is that God is
with us in the dark as well as the light,
in the tough times as well as the easy ones,
and in the struggle that we (like Jesus) are engaged in
for a better and a fairer world for everyone.

Matthew 2: 13-23

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