

Advent Meditation: By the light of the stars

by Leonie Caldecott



In the first of her meditations for Advent, Leonie Caldecott reflects that what we are stumbling towards in the darkest moment of the year is something worth making an effort for: a God who lives in every nerve and sinew of our human condition

This year, Christmas feels a long way from the starry-eyed

expectations of childhood. The upheavals of the pandemic, the sting of personal loss; the beleaguered balance in which the planet hangs. A creeping desertification seems to wrap its cold fingers around the season. The more the world cranks up its campaign for a materially perfect Christmas, the more the disjunct intensifies.

The lectionary in this year of Luke provides some synchronicity with this mood. On the first Sunday of Advent Jesus exhorts us to “stay awake, praying at all times for strength to survive all that is going to happen ...” Even if you read the apocalyptic imagery in terms of the soul (it all starts with individual conversion, those turning points in salvation history, as St Paul also reminds us), the language is challenging. Yet we know full well that any time of joyful expectation comes laced with risk. A breath is taken: it may also be taken away. The child may be delivered safely, only to be butchered by random human power.

Christmas will always be marked by the wonder of childhood. Advent, on the other hand, is for adults. Christ the King draws back his scarlet robe to reveal our smallness in the grand scheme of things. It’s a heavily pregnant moment, a downward-straining progression towards an outcome we cannot predict or control. The Lord’s own family were hardly putting their feet up at this point. His first experience of life outside the womb would be one of displacement, of forced improvisation.

Meanwhile the Magi trudge across the barren miles, all because of a hunch about a foreign Messiah. Like them, we need to look up, not down. “Hold your heads high,” Jesus says. If the incarnate God makes a suggestion about body language, we should probably take heed. What we are stumbling towards in this darkest moment of the year is something worth making an effort for: a God who lives in every nerve and sinew of our human condition. We may long to be liberated from grief, pain and despair, yet we cannot just shed these things. Acceptance of them does offer its own liberation. We are forced to throw our lot in with that Presence crowning into the dark night. That’s not nothing.

And there they are, those millions of stars signalling from eons already passed: visible to us only because of the darkness. They come out every night, without fail. If we have failed to spot them, it’s only because, as Joni Mitchell put it, “clouds got in my way”. The fear, the doubt – the falling stars shaking our souls – none of this is the final word. That belongs to another Word, its first utterance the incoherent, needy cry of a newborn. He was there in the beginning, and he will be there at the end. That’s an expectation worth waiting on. Let the apocalyptic paradox lie where it does. Christmas does not need saving. We do.

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