**The Mystery of Bethlehem**

There is a reason we celebrate Christmas at the end of December, when the weather is cold, the days short, the nights long and dark. There is a reason we celebrate Christmas at the darkest, coldest time of the year. There is a reason we come out in the dark and cold, and make our way to churches, chapels, cathedrals and monasteries, all over the world.

Our ancestors in the faith knew why. They knew something about night, and about darkness. They who lived in a world lit only by fire, knew that the world, at least at this time of the year, was indeed a dark, cold place. They knew something about the dark. They knew, as we probably don’t, how easy it is to get lost in the dark. They knew, as we probably don’t, that there are indeed things to be afraid of in the dark. They knew, as we probably don’t, that danger lurked in the darkness of the night.

And so they looked for the light. Any light. While darkness represented cold and fear and death, light was the place of warmth, and love, and life. So they looked for the light. They paid attention to the light. They knew that moment in the night when darkness gave way to light; that time of the year when the light began to overcome the dark, if only by a minute.

Our ancestors in the faith knew that on this night, things were beginning to change, and that the light was returning to the world. They knew that soon the days would lengthen, the ice and snow would melt, that light and life would return to the world once more. They could tell this by watching, indeed straining their eyes, for the coming dawn.

But if they knew something about the darkness that surrounded them during this time of the year, they also knew something of the darkness of their own lives. Like many today, they knew the darkness of hunger, fear and despair. Like many today, they knew the darkness of war, disease and death. Like many today, they knew the darkness of poverty, prejudice and disappointment.

And so they looked for the light. Indeed they strained their eyes to see the light.

For many, perhaps for many of you, this is a dark season. Perhaps you have lost something, or someone that gave shape, and purpose, or even hope to your life. Perhaps like many, you have been disturbed by events in this country, or in the world around us. Like our ancestors in the faith you are looking for the light, indeed you are straining your eyes to see the coming dawn, not just in the sky but in your life, in this nation, in our world.

And into this darkness, comes a baby.

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah,**\** *the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,**\** *praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’[[1]](#footnote-1)*

With the birth of this baby, God’s light returns to the world, for in Him God’s *light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

It is strange that God would come into the darkness of our life as a baby. We imagine that if God is to act and banish the darkness of the world and of our lives, God would do so not as a helpless infant, but in might, and power, and privilege. Yet God comes to us, not in power, but in humility. God comes to us, not by feats of strength, but in the cry of a baby, heralded by angels and worshipped by shepherds. God comes to us in the darkness of the night, the poverty of a stable, in the simplicity of a manger.

The mystery of Bethlehem disarms us, for it reverses our expectations and our experience. It shows us that God does not reject human weakness, frustration or dependence. Is shows us that if we are to look where God is coming to us in our lives, and in the world, we should look where it is dark, and cold, and where we feel most alone. It shows that if we are to look for God coming in our lives, and in the world, we should look where there is the poverty of a stable, the simplicity of a manger. For where it is dark, and cold, and lonely, where it is poor, and simple, there we can see the glimmer of God’s glory, and hear the song of the angels. There we can join the shepherds and kneel in worship.

Our ancestors knew that we need the promise of light, when all around seems dark and cold. Our ancestors in the faith knew that we need the promise of light, when things seem most dark.

This is the reason we celebrate Christmas, the coming of God’s light and life and love into the world, in December. This is the reason we look for God to come, not in the glaring blaze of midday, but at the darkest time of the year *while all things were in quiet silence and the night was in the midst of its swift course.[[3]](#footnote-3)* This is the reason we look for God to come in the weakness and vulnerability of a baby.

The mystery of Bethlehem is that God can be known in gentleness, and in weakness. The mystery of Bethlehem is that God can be found in mangers, and in stables. The mystery of Bethlehem is that God can be born in the hearts of God’s people. For God chooses the hearts of those who love Him, in which to be born. God chooses the mangers and stables of our lives, in which to be found. God chooses the places of gentleness and weakness of our lives, in which to be known.

The mystery of Bethlehem is that God comes to us in the dark, and in coming to us in the dark, brings to us the light of God’s presence. The mystery of Bethlehem is that God comes to us, even us, and perhaps especially us, when things seem most dark and cold, and there God brings light, and life, and love.

The mystery of Bethlehem is that it doesn’t matter how dark, or cold things are, Jesus is born, and God’s light breaks through the darkness. The mystery of Bethlehem is that it doesn’t matter how dark, or cold things are in your life, Jesus is born, and God’s light breaks through the darkness of your life. The mystery of Bethlehem is that wherever you are, Jesus is waiting to be born in the stable of your heart, and the glory of God’s light is waiting to dawn in your life. The mystery of Bethlehem is that even in the darkest days of December, Jesus is born, and God’s light breaks forth.

Our ancestors in the faith knew about darkness, and they strained their eyes looking for the light of God, and they found it in the birth of Jesus the Saviour, at Bethlehem.

We too know about darkness. We too know about the darkness of the night in our lives, and in the world. Like those ancestors of ours who searched the night sky waiting for signs of light, we too strain our eyes looking for the light of God’s presence to break forth into the darkness of our world, and like them we see in Jesus, God’s light breaking through the darkness and with the angels we praise God singing: *‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Like our ancestors, we too know something about the dark. We know about the darkness of the world, and of our own lives. But so too do we know about the light that shines in the darkness, and the One who is Light, that cannot be dimmed. We know our need of light, and the One who is Light. And so, we come to this place, together with people from all over the world, and we kneel in this stable, gathered around this manger, and know that once again God has been born, and has forever banished the darkness of our world, and of our lives.

The mystery of Bethlehem is that Jesus is born, and the light of God’s love shines upon us once more.

Merry Christmas everyone! God’s light and life and love are shining on you, yes, even you!*\**

**Date:** 24/25 December

**Lectionary Year and Proper:** Christmas Eve/Day

**Solemnity or Major Feast Day:** Christmas Eve/Day

**Occasion:** 1720 Project

**Place:** Monastery of Saint Mary and Saint John

**Primary text(s) to link:** Luke 2: 1 – 20; John 1: 1 – 14

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1. Luke 2: 8 – 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 1: 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. SSJE Office Book, *Antiphon on the Magnificat for the First Sunday after Christmas Day* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Luke 1: 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)