

Dear Friends,

I wonder when was the last time you felt moved with awe? When I was involved in a church school, our discussions on religious education and corporate worship would often return to the role of awe and wonder in religious worship. The approaching Christmas season is a time when awe and wonder are highly appropriate. Words taken from A Hymn of the Nativity, by Richard Crashaw (c.1613 – 1640) are often used at Christmas Eve services.

‘Welcome all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span.
Summer in winter, Day in night,
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little One whose all-embracing birth
Brings earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth’.

These poetic words always convey to me something of the awe of Christmas. It is utterly amazing that the God whose Word spoke into being all that there is, actually became clothed in flesh at the birth of Jesus. The babe of Bethlehem grew to be a man who walked on the dusty roads of the Holy Land and experienced homelessness, pain, love, rejection, temptation, hunger, thirst and even death. The Christ we worship is not just an esoteric philosophy but was actually born of Mary and spent His childhood in a human family. Jesus of history embodies the Christ of eternity. He is truly God and truly human. If this fails to inspire awe within us, then the preachers’ task is an impossible one.

A devotional writer tells of leaving a meeting in London and turning a corner to look up Regent Street where he was faced with the view of dozens of illuminated angels, ‘their giant shimmering wings stretching across the traffic’ (Sheridan Voysey, *Our Daily Bread*). Some of the angels appeared to be looking up in awe and wonder as they gazed on the Son of God and announced His birth. The writer’s imagination took him back to the Bible scenes in which the angels told Mary that she would conceive and announced Jesus birth to the shepherds who were watching their sheep. The writer of Hebrews exclaims that ‘The Son is the radiance of God’s glory’ (Heb. 1:3).

How easy it is for us to lose the awe and wonder that most of us experienced in childhood! We can become all too used to hearing the Christmas story, so

that familiarity blunts our response to it. In all the list making, and frenzied activity of a 'normal Christmas' there can be precious little time and space for contemplation, and for wonder. Although we all wish that things were different this year, and that it was safe for us to crowd into church and sing carols with gusto, perhaps there is an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the glory that entered what we think of as a dusty stable, where Mary laid her baby in a manger.

I recall that when I lived in the West Pennine Moors, and I drove back to the village manse from the local town, I would love to drive up the steep narrow road to the top of the moor where the village nestled. I would often pray that I would never lose the sense of awe I experienced when I looked to my right at the moors rising from across the fields. Again, when I lived in Hampshire, and stood on the cliff tops looking across to the Isle of Wight or looking west to Mudeford or across to the Purbecks, or simply gazing at the 'white horses' of the incoming tide, I would silently pray that I would never lose that sense of awe and wonder at the beauty and power of nature. Now, when I am able to visit Newlands Corner or Pewley Down and I look at the Surrey Hills, I again pray that I may never cease to be awed at the outstanding beauty of nature. And, when at home I stop for a moment before one of our many nativity sets and I think for a moment of the miracle of the incarnation, I sometimes pray that the wonder and the awe in my soul may never fade. I thank God, that so far, He has granted all these prayers!

I really don't know when you were last moved with awe and wonder. My prayer for you is that however recent or long ago it was, that the next time may be just around the corner, when we 'delight to hear again the message of the angels, and in heart and mind go even to Bethlehem and see ... the Babe lying in a manger'.

May God richly bless you,

Keith

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