

Carols by Candlelight 2017

God with us

Opening Prayer

God,

Spinning worlds, spiral galaxies, humming electrons, dust in space, the fact of gravity and mystery of ice, multiplying cells and raging suns, the immeasurably big and immeasurably small accentuate the power of our human desire for purpose, identity and belonging. The universe teems with information being exchanged, in every physical, chemical encounter and, ultimately, in the trembling of ear drum as word is spoken, relationship invited and heart moved. It's all set up for community. We are made for relationship. We are made for praise.

But instead of relishing the hilarity and grace of our smallness, desperately we over assert ourselves. Regimes adjudicate without feeling. Rash judgements are tweeted without integrity. Press judge without compassion. The dubious authority of public opinion staggers and swerves drunkenly. We shore up our own vulnerable hearts with cynicism and wonder is twisted into suspicion.

God, we are suspicious of judgement, but terrified if there is none. We struggle for perspective between the long and the immediate, the heavenly and earthly, the tiny and the grand. As we spend time with you, hearing how you spend your time with us, help us to re-learn how to trust your judgement. Restore our capacity for praise, thanks and wonder: the things that make for relationship and so prove we belong.

We belong with you.

Amen.

Readings

John 1:1-14

Psalms 7:1-11

Micah 5:2-5

Matthew 1:18-25

Luke 2:1-20

Matthew 5:2-10

Reflection

They had a lovely warm evening with fragrant food and comforting television, turning over the day's modest achievements. Next morning, though, he rather irritably portions delicious left overs into freezer containers and labels the small meals. "We'll get some decent food inside her" he says, exasperated by his mother's wilfully poor diet. In that moment he is doing something to her. He curses his own impatience, then admits he does not know how long she will be there. With a bit more affection now he puts the little containers in the freezer drawer. He is doing something for her now, although it is for him, too. Anticipating what it will be like when she's gone he will want to look back and know he did at least enough not to feel guilty in retrospect. Ah. That's still largely about him, then, a mixture of doing to and doing for. Pulling away from his childhood home he stifles a tear, smiles and waves. A few days later, on the phone he asks what she's had for tea. She can't remember, but reads the label he'd written. "Oh, that was what we had on the day we went to the park. We watched such and such..." and her memory of the pleasures is released and the togetherness is re-lived, so now the cooking and the practicality and the responsibility are all serving their togetherness. Now the cooking is about being with her. And now her best quality is released: an unstoppable capacity for thanksgiving. Her disproportionate gratitude for the meal, for the re-kindled memories and the present telephone togetherness, both judges and heals his irritability. She unknowingly gives him a gift, slightly softening the defensiveness he may be developing against grief. She is being with him.

From the lover's hand you discover is holding yours as you emerge groggy from anaesthetic, to the wordless hug after bad news, to the knowledge that although they're far away someone you respect is thinking of you as you face a challenge, to the sudden discovery that you aren't the only one who lives with this or that worry, addiction or hurt, to the child working out what it means still to be child while taking on adult roles in support of their parent, knowing someone is with you is even more important than all the very important ways that people might do things for you, or to you.

The reasons are ancient. Very ancient indeed. When we as individuals and indeed countries feel threatened, we scramble too desperately for security and identity, fear like static scrambling the signals of love that could give us all we need. The four millennia of Judeo-Christian searching trace our attempts to find proper human confidence with God and also our wilful tendency to subvert the solution. Most of our worst behaviours are distortions of great gifts. Jealousy is a twisted inversion of thanksgiving. Suspicion is a kind of ruined inquisitiveness. Fear is a distortion of wonder. We can sympathise with anyone for whom hard, unfair experience has made such distortion more likely, but it does not have to be so.

Joseph, with firm resolve, chose to be with the woman he at first thought had betrayed him. The Shepherds impulsively hurried to be with the odd family in whom they had been told God had come to be with them. Mary, having formed the child within her very self, did things to him, wrapping him tight; for him, finding the makeshift protection of a manger, breast feeding and watching him: all so as tenderly to be with him, although all the circumstances and ensuing danger were screaming "Don't fall in love with the boy. You'll only get hurt." We glimpse, maybe, the staggering resilient love of young Rohingya girls whom states declare stateless, re-configuring their family after slaughter and escape, staying with each other, even as rain water streams through their makeshift dwellings.

When the angel said to those shepherds "this shall be the sign to you," he was highlighting what is significant about the scene they would encounter. The things that will bring peace and joy and restoration of humanity are: God's proving he is with us in the defiant tenderness of ordinary mothering in extraordinary circumstances; he is with us when best laid plans have gone awry; he is with us at the thresholds of love and birth, just when we're at our most vulnerable; he is in a manger, [*manger* to eat] he is the very food the world hungers blindly for; God has come, allowing himself to be done to and done for, so as to prove he is with us and so as to become the gift that will restore our humanity.

Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, that when as an adult he first sits down to preach, he looks straight into our deepest need and vulnerability, names them, refuses to be embarrassed by them, and declares there is hope. God is with us in mourning, humility, peace-making, hunger of all kinds, persecution. Unembarrassed he will not go away. God will be with us come what may. Our isolationism cannot keep God out.

God may seem quaint, ineffective or even burdensome to many but, rather as the mother's thankfulness released the resentful son's thankfulness and made possible their togetherness, so God's apparently ineffective presence among us uniquely can release the embattled human qualities that have been distorted by bitterness. God could come and do stuff for us, which would soon make us lazy. He could do stuff to us, which would soon make us resentful. But instead, God comes to be with us, and it is only his company that can assure us we are meant to be here. Only in that warm knowledge can we relax enough for features twisted by pain or resentment, over protectiveness and over assertion, to return to their proper God-refracting beauty. Only in that divine company can we laugh, unthreatened, and rejoice in beauty of others.

Prayers

God, if you came this way, we may dare to pray: Test our hearts and minds. Accepting threats will come and go, but knowing you are with us, dare us to search our own hearts more energetically than we search other people's; our own nation's motives more than others'. (cf Psalm 7)

Noticing you started in Nazareth, then Bethlehem, then ended in Jerusalem, then went back to the outskirts for a discreetly loving farewell, we risk offering you our hierarchies and status anxieties to see if you can melt them away. Bend and flex our expectations of ourselves and one another. Dissolve the jealousies that would set town and country and city and classes and tribes apart. Show up the comical absurdity of our belligerent over-assertion. Child in a feeding trough, reveal how facile are the claims of power through fear. Help us be with one another so as to affirm each other's belonging and release each others' gifts. (cf Micah 5)

Raising an eyebrow that Jesus who forgives sins was conceived in scandal, and admiring Joseph and Mary's resilience, we recognise that forgiveness is a scandal and pray for resilience when it is belittled or dismissed. For it releases our distorted features; it is the healing of separateness and isolation. (Matthew 1)

As you have come to be with us, we take courage to bring all whose need, illness, tender relationships, nervous parenthood, tiredness, or potential weighs on our hearts.... When there is nothing to be fixed, little to be done or said, we ask you to show us how to be with them. Amen.