

A gift from the heart of God

Christmas 2023

A young woman of faith who is going through a difficult time told me last week that she is really taken with the bible verse; 'the loving kindness of the heart of our God will visit us like the dawn from on high'. I asked her why and she explained that there is a lot of loss in her life right now. She said; 'I need hope and I choose to believe that for Christmas the gift of loving kindness is coming for me right from the heart of our God.'

We all need hope. You, as you read this, may be lonely or sad or desolate for many personal reasons. Our world needs hope. Listen to the news from the Holy Land or Ukraine; here in Donegal our towns and villages are awash with drugs and Mica is still a huge cloud over many people's lives; the sacred gift of life is cherished less and less among us. We are a weary world in need of a saviour, a prince of Peace.

**The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.**

Christian hope is not the same as optimism; it does not fear to look troubles in the eye. The Christmas story is about a God, all loving and all powerful, going looking for trouble. He searched out the poor and the outcast and the lowly and he was born as one of them because he loved them. Because he loves us.



"The Shepherds went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger." I invite you to make space to contemplate again the timeless tale of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. The shepherds – themselves lowly, miserable types, who were not well thought of – were guided by a heavenly light. They encountered the humble scene and they saw the embodiment of God's love wrapped in rags. The child Jesus – a gift from the heart of our God.

We don't all enjoy the festivities in the same way. If for some reason they drag on you, you can be like one of those shepherds. They were humble and lowly but open to the gift of seeing the presence of God, amazingly at home in the broken and imperfect world that we live in. If, on the other hand – praise God – you delight in the togetherness and the giving and receiving of gifts you can choose to be like Mary. In her quiet strength 'she treasured all these things and pondered on them in her heart'



Whether you are caught up in the hustle and bustle these days, or not, all of us Christians are invited to be still enough to ponder the extraordinary love that descended from the heavens into a humble manger. Jesus did not come for the people with perfect lives, who have it all together. He came into a broken, war-torn world out of love for the lonely, the disregarded, the refugee, the sinner.

It is my fervent hope that everyone of us will celebrate this Christmas 'the loving kindness of the heart of our God who visits us like the dawn from on high.'

+Bishop Alan McGuckian SJ