

**Christmas Day 2017**  
**Fr Jonathan Jong**

Isaiah 52: 7-10

Hebrews 1: 1-6

John 1: 1-18

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The days are getting lighter again, now that the solstice has come and gone. On that day each year, when the Earth's northern hemisphere is tilted farthest away from the Sun, the Church greets the Lord as the rising Sun: our Dayspring, the splendour of light eternal. On our darkest day, we bid him come to us, who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

To be sure, things are going to get colder before they get warmer, but the darkness is receding at last.

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Things *are* going to get colder.

Christian hope should not be mistaken for naïve optimism, in much the same way that faith ought not be mistaken for wishful-thinking or love for hormonal derangement.

It is not for nothing that before we celebrate the visitation of the magi with their gifts of frankincense, myrrh, and gold, we will first be confronted with the memory of St Stephen and of the Holy Innocents: the earliest martyrs, one stoned to death by an angry mob, and the children slaughtered by the jealous insecurity of King Herod the great middle managing despot. And, of course, frankincense and myrrh are themselves reminders of this child's fate, born to us and murdered by the same: frankincense is for burning, which is to say, for destroying; and myrrh is for anointing and embalming the dead.

Make no mistake, it is perilous times, into which this child was born. The eloquence of Ovid, Virgil, Horace, and other poets I've not read mustn't distract us from the horrors of Roman imperial rule: recall the gladiatorial fights, and then the slaughtering of thousands when the slave-gladiators revolted just a

few generations before Jesus was born; or the other spectator favourite, in which criminals were condemned to lions; or Varus's crucifixion of 2,000 Jewish rebels, just after Herod died.

And it was going to get worse, at least for him. And for his people: three Jewish rebellions in under a century, all utterly crushed by Roman legionary forces, not to mention the destruction of Jerusalem; and the sporadic persecution of the early Christians, on whom creative varieties of torture and execution were inflicted.

And yet, he came. Even in the darkness, the light shone. The world knew him not and perceived him not, and all the same: this gift, a baby in a manger, of questionable parentage, born in occupied territory, only to flee for asylum; all the same, this gift is given.

This is what hope looks like: God comes, even into this world, not despite its horrors but because of them. After all, this is the world that needs this child who will love it to death, and to the life that lies beyond even death.

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This, then, is how hope and optimism differ, if the latter is the disposition to assume that things are either not as bad as they seem or will, in any case, get better soon. Hope does not require us to believe the statistically dubious<sup>1</sup> and metaphysically quaint claim that the world is getting inexorably better—less violent, more empathetic—though there is surely *some* sense in which things have improved between the imperial Roman occupation of Palestine and the American-financed Zionist occupation of the same.

More importantly perhaps, hope does not require us to participate in the fashionable delusion that it is either Enlightenment rationality or the free market that has granted us this one-way ticket to paradise: the same intellectual projects that ended up prioritising eugenics as a goal of applied statistics and slavery as an exemplary case of global free trade<sup>2</sup>.

No, Christian hope requires us neither to be cheery about the state of the world nor about any particular

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/694568>; <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0378437116000923>

<sup>2</sup> <https://aeon.co/essays/why-the-original-laissez-faire-economists-loved-slavery>

effort to improve it. The hopeful are allowed to perceive that peace predicated on terror of mutually-assured destruction is no true peace, but quite literally a nuclear bomb waiting for just the wrong kakistocrat with bad hair to show up. The hopeful can remain so, and not despair, while accepting the tragic possibility that our meagre efforts at ethical consumerism and global financial aid are, in the final estimation, band-aids with dubious long term benefits.

It is perilous times, into which children are born. We have 15,000 of those nuclear bombs around the world: in July, the House of Commons voted to update our arsenal, which costs £2 billion per year to keep; the four new nuclear submarines we want comes to £31 billion<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, we have been promised welfare cuts of £12 billion. Last year, two-and-a-half million children died of causes related to malnutrition<sup>4</sup>; meanwhile, the UK commits over 4 million tonnes of avoidable food waste every year. The number of child soldiers doubled in Somalia and Syria between 2015 and 2016<sup>5</sup>, and the Syrian Civil War alone has now

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<sup>3</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7353#fullreport>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs178/en/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.undocs.org/S/2017/821>

killed 25,000 children<sup>6</sup>. Of the 650,000 Rohingya who have fled to Bangladesh, over half are children, including more than 40,000 orphaned or otherwise unaccompanied. I can't imagine what Christmas morning looks like for them.

And yet, he comes still, to these waste places of Jerusalem, and by his presence here redeems us and calls us to join him. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation is not a story about how God came once upon a time to visit us for a bit until things got out of hand. It is, rather, the story of the God who is ever with those under oppressive regimes and treated like animals, even to have a feeding trough as a cot, even to have a cross as a deathbed. It is, in other words, not the story of an optimistic God, who had misjudged his audience, but a bloody-minded one, who will be deterred neither by our self-destructiveness nor by our empty promises that time itself will heal our self-inflicted wounds. And so it is that our God, this Son of Mary, dwells among us, and from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/link-files/WAR%20CHILD%20SYRIA%20BRIEFING%20REPORT.pdf>

That saying about how the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice: Barack Obama picked it up from Martin Luther King, who got it from that great if heretical 19th century Unitarian minister and American abolitionist Theodore Parker. They knew, of course, that it doesn't bend on its own: they would not have lived as they had if it did. They knew that the fulfilment of their hopes required courage and vigilance and sacrifice<sup>7</sup> and struggle<sup>8</sup>. King's moral universe was, as you might expect, overtly theological: "Those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ", he writes in 1958, "find something at the center of our faith which forever reminds us that God is on the side of truth and justice."<sup>9</sup> It is neither blind forces of history nor the benevolence and ingenuity of human beings that are the primary source of King's hope, but the one who has been born to us this day, whose gift to us is the incorporation into his own body and therefore our invitation into his victory, even over death. "So",

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/transcript-president-obamas-speech-on-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-march-on-washington/2013/08/28/0138e01e-0ffb-11e3-8cdd-bcdc09410972\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.28da0b85ce07](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/transcript-president-obamas-speech-on-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-march-on-washington/2013/08/28/0138e01e-0ffb-11e3-8cdd-bcdc09410972_story.html?utm_term=.28da0b85ce07)

<sup>8</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/statement-ending-bus-boycott>

<sup>9</sup> <https://archive.org/details/gospelmessengerv107mors>, p. 179

King concludes, “in Montgomery, Alabama, we can walk and never get weary, because we know that there will be a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice”. And it was thus in Montgomery because it was so first in Bethlehem, and so it can be also now in East Jerusalem, and in Aleppo, and in Cox’s Bazaar, and even in Westminster and Washington D.C. Hope, shaped and guided by love, breeds courage: and those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ are called therefore to walk with him, upon the mountains and to the all the ends of the earth, bringing good tidings and publishing peace and salvation.

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The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And in his light, we shall overcome the world.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**