

Wondering Love

Carols by Candlelight, Sunday 18th December 2022

READINGS:

Divine Wonder John 1:1-14 God imagines us into being and wonders how we will respond.

Human Wonder PSALM 8 A solitary soul relishes the mystery of consciousness

Reconciling Wonder Isaiah 55:6-12 Flawed and lost people realise they can be reconciled with their wondrous creator.

Conceiving Wonder Luke 1:26-38 One wondrous soul makes possible the en-fleshed existence of God's essence.

Encouraging Wonder Luke 1:39-56 People on the margins are free enough to enliven one another's wonder.

Risking Wonder Matthew 1:18-25a When hurt, wonder is no easy option.

Enlivening Wonder Luke 2:1-21 The empathy of strangers eclipses the dreary utility of imperial bureaucracy.

REFLECTION

Carefully seared all over, the chicken now sat in the pot with onion, celery and garlic shining and bubbling in wine, their sweetness filling the little stone dwelling. As he picked up a sprig of sage, he found himself crying. The grey-green leaves, slightly velvet on one side, a lattice of veins on the other and their tangy scent, were suddenly extraordinarily vivid. He'd come to a remote, beautiful place to step away from the intensity of work, to release the heart for a while and test his vocation which could be obscured in a task-oriented way of life, and he was arrested in that moment by the connections. He wondered at the human discoveries in 150,000 years of cooking with fire; the knowledge passed down, the discovery of fermentation and the wine-making perfected; the meals cooked in that three hundred year old shepherd's cottage; the rotation of the earth that made it night and prompted the shutters to be closed; and he wondered at the accidents of friendship that led him to that dwelling, and felt the emotive fact that he had a meaningful role to be tired by and take a break from, – one charged with many people's sorrow and joy - and he sighed at the absurd good fortune that he had beloved people to miss. All this came to him in a concertina second and he realised he was holding the sage leaves just as he hold out the bread whenever he presides at Holy Communion. The heart stretched and the tears came. For all the years of busyness, he was relieved to find, the capacity for wonder was still there.

Here, not in a cottage but a church, not with food, but with music, not with alpine moonlight but flickering candle flame, we come perhaps to do the same. We step aside for a little while from the bureaucracy, tasks, pressures and obligations, which may not in themselves be bad, but can leave our soul somewhat overgrown. We step aside from the news that batters the heart and makes us necessarily protective. We step into a space where time feels different and poetry seems close to our lips; a brief sabbatical where intellect still applies but is not in sole control. We come to wonder at the connections and possibilities with an intensity we perhaps cannot sustain all the time. Whatever our outlook or codified beliefs, we seek a safe space for wonder just for a little while. It's a very human thing to do.

Wonder is a state of mind and heart that is open to what we do not yet know; it is a way of being which does not expect to control the outcome; it is a non-productive yet fertile condition which allows something, we do not predict what, to grow. Wonder banishes entitlement and beckons

thanksgiving. It is a reaching out from our very specific existence to an essence of some kind; it is an expectation of meaning; it is to delight in cognition.

And wonder is no soft option. For its ceding control and its expectation that the universe is not only as we see it, means that we can be arrested by the world's horror as well as its beauty; in a state of wonder we risk empathising with others. It's where we shudder, imagining an icy death, feel the grief of strangers, and gasp at the need of refugees, and feel bewildered by delusional violence, or revolted by shrill religious lawyers celebrating execution. Yet, to feel all this connection in wonder is to accept both our smallness and our significance, just as the Psalm described. Wonder is where the infinite and the finite play together.

That poet knew that babes and infants, whose benevolent disruption of our ordered lives, their eager eyes drinking in the surprise of existence, and their vulnerability and dependence drawing protectiveness from us all make them key defenders of that essence of God in us. Isaiah showed what we need and crave from God: a love which names the horror and leads on to heal and forgive. God's thoughts being "higher" than ours doesn't mean s/he's merely cleverer. Rather, when our head is bowed and we trudge one pace at a time to the next task, or from one bleak news item to the next, and hope for little more than survival, and our reflex becomes defensive, and our impulses aggressive, God's wondrous perspective creates the conditions for mercy and peace to bloom again. The poet understands how our wonder can be dampened, so he helps us laugh our way back to wonder, imagining the very mountains and trees singing and clapping for their creator. He teases our sluggishness, for we of all creatures have *consciousness* with which to respond to the wondrous One who made us so wondrous.

The non-aggressive essence of God can enter our story whenever we are open in wonder, and then amazing things can happen. We witness this evening how Mary's wonder ("How can this be...here am I...") allowed her to conceive Jesus. Wonder's empathy and eagerness made her hurry to her old cousin, who in turn rejoiced, their conversation glittering with joy, praise, gratitude, hope: all the human glories their differently untimely and shaming circumstances attempted to crush. Far from crushed, Mary's wonder allowed her to imagine a world where the humble are lifted up and inept leaders humbled. In his pain, meanwhile, Joseph's empathy made him attempt to protect the woman he thought had betrayed him, so his heart remained open enough for the wonder of dreams to speak to him and embolden him to choose trust. As Imperial bureaucracy attempted to commoditise them for tax purposes, and frustrate even their healthcare, they defied that drab two dimensional world and wrapped the child tenderly, making a cot from a manger: "Yah boo sucks" Emperor. Night shift key workers who were not made cynical by their unsocial labour were open to wonder, startled by the light of heaven when the world saw only darkness. Their contagious joy proves they were more alive than many an Emperor whose untrustworthy power could not diminish what they proved to be true: joy is a community matter. They shared it with each other; they shared it with the odd little family; they went on sharing it as they returned to their grimy lives. They shared it with God.

And after all the set-backs, Mary still wondered, treasuring all this in her heart. We in turn, in our different ways, treasure all these things in our heart for a little while. As the tired priest discovered, wonder is a meeting with the essence of God. That little leap of the heart at a view, or the plunge of the heart beholding tragedy is an impulsive reaching out in praise or lament to the Word through whom all things were made and who wants us here. Wonder is the essence of prayer. In that sense, every human being who ever lived has prayed.

In our concertina hour of wonder, we have stepped from the bustle where anxiety presses down, and shapeless worry lurks and nagging stirrings of compassion unsettle. In this different kind of space, where music's tender strength could stretch our hearts open, we notice myriad connections and let God's ambitions for reconciliation, joy and peace take hold. Here our truest self looks up

with tears on her cheeks. In wondering love we have not escaped from the world. We have escaped to reality.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Our best prayers may be without words, but tracing their patterns can also be a help. Just in case, we might also pray:

God, in the vulnerability of this hour we feel afresh the miracle of our consciousness and know our intense connectivity with each other, with the cosmos, with you. It can be hard to bear, like too bright a light, or the cold air's first brush on a new born infant's skin. But we thank you for making us so. For you made us without controlling our response to you. You were ready to wonder. We are free not to recognise you.

So your coming in Christ to be with us in our wondrous smallness moves us. We trust you understand if sometimes we recoil in self-protection: the news too bleak, the need too heavy, the shocks too sharp. Send us at such times the people who will encourage our wonder, re-ignite our joy and deepen our thinking. Show us the places where it is safe to let the tears come.

And when with gifts for a stranger in need we defy the fearful policies of prejudice;

when we meet unassailable grief with some kind of beauty;

when generosity breaks through in wartime;

when a little kindness beckons someone back from the brink,

if arrogant humanity forgets to wonder, let the mountains break into song and the trees clap their hands until we learn to join in again. **Amen.**