

## EAST LEAKE BIBLE STUDY GROUP – CHRISTMAS 1982

I have no doubt that at times you feel that life is futile and that you have a sense of helplessness when things go wrong and when there is so much demanding attention – we may feel that we cannot go on coping, and we feel that we are getting nowhere.

Elijah came into mind in connection with this – he is one of the major forerunners of the Messiah but not one we usually associate with the present season – except that John the Baptist was associated with his forerunner. You will remember that after his victory over the prophets of Baal he panicked and fled for his life when he heard that Jezebel was after his blood. (1Kings 18) you will record the events leading to his arrival on Mount Horeb and how he was commanded to go and stand on the face of that mountain – all the forces of nature passed him by – hurricane, earthquake, fire, but God was in none of these – finally a gentle breeze and stillness – God spoke to Elijah in this stillness, and you know how his fears gave place to confidence in God and he was strengthened to continue his mission.

Stillness is a rare commodity – there is physical stillness – the absence of noise; there can be stillness within us; there may be stillness about a person however occupied he or she may be. It is a God given grace and we must prepare for it – seek it as opportunity allows – some of you may find it today – or in those odd moments which occur day by day. Things happen when we are still. You may have heard of the term “the womb of silence”, the womb of the earth, creativity in dark, hidden silent depths – “The womb of creation”. “In the beginning God...” to quote from the opening words of the Bible – or from St John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the word.” God and the word linked with beginning – the silence, the tremendous originality. Then the word was made flesh – and lived among us. Mystery; the mystery of the Birth of Jesus. God is, and always has been, and shall be forever-more – the Nativity – the dawning of our hope, quickened in silence.

There is the stillness we are trying to capture or at least savour about this hidden meaning of Christmas. Oh yes it is hidden except from those who have eyes to see – The commercial world sells Christmas to its customers and I’m afraid there is much about it that most of us don’t want – and which many dread, and which is a mockery to those not “blessed” with this world’s goods – those without basic requirements – 2 out of 3 hungry or starving, or homeless or stateless – and the bereaved – those who mourn the death of loved ones in N.Ireland, Beirut and the Lebanon, the Falklands and today’s wars– the anxious. The tinsel adds to the mockery.

I think that awareness of the hidden meaning of the festival overcomes all boundaries and is therefore, at its truest, a blessing, a healing. What about families? We may be trying to glimpse what Christmas is about and they, the children especially, want their presents and parties and so on – and we like them too! Is all this whirl incompatible with Christmas? Is it? Remember the heavenly host of angels, thousands upon millions, rank upon rank, chorusing “Glory to God”. And think of these enduringly lovely verses from St Luke’s Gospel – the stillness all wrapped up with joy and glory. The angel’s message: “I bring you news of great joy to be shared by all people. Today in this city of David, a Saviour has been born to us; he is Christ the Lord.”

Many people have tried to recapture this. Handel for instance, in his incomparable “Messiah” – his Glory to God, Glory to God, Glory to God in the highest. We may not be angels or a Handel, but we each have our capacity for expressing joy – a little child’s rendering of a carol, or an old man’s “Happy Christmas.” True joy brings great healing; it is a great missionary and doctor so do let us pass on our joy and share it - it doesn’t grow less with sharing – it is like yeast hidden in the dough.

I read the following recently and I thought it might help. “You must look at the child in the manger – He is our love – Look at him, that the whole thing is a mystery. We need to accept this mystery on faith and use our faith to explore it very deeply. To do this we must have the humble attitude of a Christian soul – let us not try to reduce the greatness of God to our own poor ideas and human explanations. Let us try to understand that this mystery, for all its darkness, is a light to guide men’s lives.”

Jesus, a light to guide men's lives; the world's hope, the world's Redeemer. How much the Earth needs its saviour! Where are the eyes of this needy Earth turning? Where does it look for hope? I think in our heart of hearts we know that without Christ we are nothing – Remember Dr Coleman's talk about his imprisonment in Iran; his dependence on his saviour. God does not fail and we heard Dr Coleman's constant reiteration of this. His need was met a hundredfold. And his remark when he told us about someone who envied him his faith – "it is not my faith you want, that is poor and weak – it is my God you want." It is this God the world needs and he is there for the taking.

Here is a verse from Vespers, which we sing at this time of the year:

"Creator of the stars of night  
thy people's everlasting light  
Jesus Redeemer saves us all  
And here thy servants when they call."

Finally a quotation from 'New Testament Christianity' by J.B. Phillips:-

It may give us a fresh perspective on life, if for a few moments we shed the limitations of earthbound thinking and detach ourselves deliberately from modern pressures and problems. Let us pretend for a little while; the pretence may be fanciful, but it may help us to let the real truth break over us afresh.

Once upon a time, a very young angel was being shown round the splendid glories of the universes by an experienced and senior angel. To tell the truth, the little angel was beginning to be tired and a little bored. He had been shown whirling galaxies and blazing suns, infinite distances in the deathly cold of winter – stellar space and to his mind, there seemed to be an awful lot of it all. Finally, he was shown the galaxy of which our planetary system is but a small part. As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its ? planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

"I want you to watch that one particularly," said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

"Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me," said the little angel. "What's special about that one?"

"That," replied his senior solemnly, "is the Visited Planet." "Visited?" said the little one. "You don't mean visited by - ?"

"Indeed I do. That ball, which I have no doubt looks to you small and insignificant and not perhaps over clean, has been visited by our young Prince of Glory." And at those words he lowered his head reverently.

"But how?" queried the younger one. "Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince, with all these wonders and splendours of His Creation, and millions more that I haven't seen yet, went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should he do a thing like that?"

"It isn't for us," said his senior a little stiffly, "to question His 'Why's,' except that I must point out to you that He is not impressed by size and members, as you seem to be. But that He really went I Know, and all of us in Heaven who know anything know about that. as to why he became one of them – how else do you suppose could He visit them?"

The little angels face wrinkled in disgust.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that He stooped so low to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?"

"I do, and I don't think He would like you calling them 'creeping, crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For strange as it seems to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him."

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.

“Close your eyes for a moment,” said the senior angel, “and we will go back in what they call time.”

While the little angel’s eyes were closed and the two of them drew nearer to the spinning ball, it stopped its spinning, spun backwards quite fast for a while, and then slowly resumed its usual rotation.

“Now look!” And as the little angel did as he was told, there appeared here and there on the dull surface of the globe little flashes of light, some merely momentary and some persisting for quite a time.

“Well, what am I seeing now?” queried the little angel “you are watching this little world as it was some thousands of years ago,” returned his companion. Every flash and glow of light that you see is something of the Father’s knowledge and wisdom breaking into the hearts and minds of people who live upon the earth. Not many people, you see, can hear His voice or understand what He says, even though He is speaking gently and quietly to them all the time.”

“Why are they so blind and deaf and stupid? Asked the junior angel rather crossly.

“It is not for us to judge them; we who live in the splendour have no idea what it is like to live in the dark. We hear the music and the voice like the sound of many waters every day of our lives, but to them – well, there is so much darkness, much noise, and much distraction upon the earth. Only a few who are quiet and humble and wise hear His voice. But watch, for in a moment you will see something truly wonderful.”

The Earth went on turning and circling round the sun, and then quite suddenly, in the upper half of the globe, there appeared a light, tiny but so bright that both the angels hid their eyes.

“I think I can guess,” said the little angel in a low voice. “That was the visit, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that was the Visit. The Light Himself went down there and lived among them; but in a moment, you will be able to tell that even with your eyes closed, the light will go out.”

“But why? Could he not bear their darkness and stupidity? Did He have to return here?”

“No it wasn’t that,” returned the senior angel. His voice was stern and sad. “They failed to recognise Him for who He was – or at least only a handful knew him. For the most part they preferred their darkness to His light, and in the end they killed Him”.

“The fools, the crazy fools! They don’t deserve”

“Neither you nor I, nor any other angel, knows why they were so foolish and so wicked. Nor can we say what they deserve or don’t deserve. But the fact remains; they killed our Prince of Glory while He was man amongst them.”

“And that I suppose was the end? I see the whole Earth has gone black and dark. All right, I won’t judge them, but surely that is all they could expect?”

“Wait, we are still far from the end of the story of the Visited Planet. Watch now, but be ready to cover your eyes again.”

In utter blackness, the earth turned round three times and then there blazed with unbearable radiance a point of light.

“What now?” asked the little angel shielding his eyes.

“They killed Him all right, but He conquered death. The thing most of them dread or fear all their lives He broke and conquered. He rose again, and a few of them saw Him and then from then on became His utterly devoted slaves.”

“Thank God for that,” said the little angel.

“Amen. Open your eyes now the dazzling light has gone. The prince has returned to His Home of Light. But watch the earth now.” As they looked, in place of the dazzling light there was a bright glow, which throbbed and pulsated. Then as the Earth turned many times, little points of light spread out. A few flickered and died; but for the most part the lights burned steadily, and as they continued to watch, in many parts of the globe there was a glow over many areas.

“You see what is happening?” asked the senior angel. “The bright glow is the company of loyal men and women He left behind, and with His help they spread the glow and now lights begin to shine all over the Earth.”

“Yes, yes,” said the little angel impatiently, “but how does it end? Will the little lights join up with each other? Will it be all light, as it is in Heaven?”

His senior shook his head. “We simply do not know,” he replied. “It is in the Father’s hands. Sometimes it is agony to watch and sometimes it is joy unspeakable. The end is not yet. Now I am sure you can see why this little ball is so important. He has visited it; He is working out His Plan upon it.”

“Yes I see though I don’t understand. I shall never forget that this is the Visited Planet.”

Imaginary? Fanciful? Certainly, but a good deal truer than some of our current modern thinking. For in the eyes of the Eternal World this little planet is of the highest importance simply because it is the Visited Planet. We may not realise it all, but we are right plumb in the middle of a vast drama, a tremendous battle between light and darkness. The whole core and essence of the Christian Faith, which many of us hold so lightly, is that Light Himself visited our darkness, scaled down to fit the human scene. It is true that since the visit we knew for certain that this rolling ball is by no means our permanent home; our destiny is higher even than the angels. But today, and every day that we live in the here and now, we are part of the vast Experiment, the age-long battle, whose stage and testing – ground is the planet which we call the earth.”

J.B.Phillips