

THE MOST IMPORTANT GIFT

Old Marlborough Carol Concert

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How wonderful to listen to the beautiful poem “Christmas” by John Betjeman read so well by Michael.

As we know, as well as being a poet laureate and an Old Marlborian, Betjeman was a great broadcaster and journalist; a champion of Victorian churches, values, trains and even Cornwall. But apparently he was not as ebullient and self-confident as the persona he projected.

Betjeman went to Marlborough College as a pupil at the age of fourteen. According to his reports he was bad at games in a school where sporting prowess was highly prized. Instead he wrote poetry, he sketched, he wore his hair suspiciously long, and was described by a fellow pupil as "a triumphant misfit".

What an accolade - one that I am sure all Marlborians would be proud of. But something makes me think he was a brave man, not afraid to ask the most difficult question of all:

*And is it true?
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?*

Some of you may have been watching *The Hunt*, a new BBC series narrated by David Attenborough. The underwater sequences of the blue whale feeding on krill, vast jaws open and mouth expanding, images that have never been taken before, causes one to hold ones breath in awe of that gigantic creature and the beauty of our oceans and planet. Or perhaps you saw the magnificent creativity of the Australian sand bubbler crab, no bigger than a pea, that shifts out microscopic food particles and then leaves pellets in its wake creating beautiful patterns in the sand.

And you might ask why did I bring *The Hunt* up? For Betjeman, the wonders of the natural world were also what brought him close to God. I quote: “from the immensity of the stars to the perfection of an insect - I cannot believe that I am surrounded by a purposeless accident”. In other words he could not believe that life was without meaning.

“But can I believe this most fantastic story of all: that the Maker of the stars and of the centipedes became a baby in Bethlehem not so long ago. No time ago at all when you reckon the age of the earth. Well, it’s asking a lot. If I weren’t such a highbrow it would be easier. No man of intelligence can believe such a thing. A child of Jewish parents, the Creator of the universe? Absurd. But if it is not true, why was I born? And if it is true, nothing else is of so much importance. No date in time is so important as Christmas Day, the birthday of God made man”.

And then we remember the words that Gabriel spoke to Mary in Luke’s Gospel, “therefore the child to be born will be holy, he will be called ‘Son of God’” (Luke 1:35) and Mary, in faith and innocence, believed.

And so when we look around us tonight, here in this beautiful church, and all around London we see carol singers and Salvation Army bands; Christmas cards, wreaths and lights; cathedrals and church music; shining bells in towers and steeples; and the silence and present-giving of Christmas Day; all bear witness to this truth. We should not imagine them as without significance - they are not just Christmas “frizzeries” - they are our cultural paths and signs that signal the coming of the Lord. They are the pointers like John the Baptist “was a voice crying in the wilderness, preparing a path for the way of the lord”, preparing the hearts of men and women for the coming of the Lord.

And if, like Betjeman, we believe this also, how should we respond to this truth? Tonight and in the days leading up to Christmas we can get direction both from scripture and poetry.

For instance, by asking about the nature of God on earth, I am comforted by the first letter of John (4:16): “God is love and those who live in Love live in God, and He in them”. God is love and how we respond to that love comes to earth for you and me.

From poetry, my favourite Christmas hymn *In the Bleak Mid-winter*, originally a poem by Christina Rossetti, gives me direction. In the first memorable stanza, Rossetti creates a dreary and desolate image of the world into which the infant Jesus appeared by drawing on the experience of a British winter: “Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone”. We might feel in this current time of deep uncertainty, international conflict, the suffering of the migrants, and climate change disasters, that we are experiencing a bleak midwinter of our own.

Christina Rossetti asks herself and the singer or listener what Christ’s birth means for humanity. She concludes that ‘all’ we can do is bring our hearts. The winter invites us to offer our own gift to the Christ Child just as the shepherds and the wise men did. Rather than the present of a lamb or expensive gifts however we can offer the most important gift of all: our hearts.

And each and every one of us has a heart to give.

Amen.