

## A Christmas Message from Fr. Gordon 2019

*He slept all refulgent, in the manger of oak wood, / Like a moonbeam within a deep-hollowed tree. from Star of the Nativity, by Boris Pasternak*

*Ring in the valiant one and free, / The larger heart, the kindlier hand! / Ring out the darkness of the land; / Ring in the Christ that is to be! from In Memorium, by Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

My Dear Friends in Christ,

You may have heard me confess this before. . . . By the time I graduated from high school I had pretty much rejected religion and religious faith, at least in the form I had inherited these from birth. I did not go so far as to become an atheist; but I did doubt both the veracity and the usefulness of much of what I had been taught about God and Christ. Instead, I turned for inspiration to secular poetry, to writers and works that presented, I thought, an equally powerful spiritual message without the 'encumbrance' of doctrine or prescribed worship.

But a curious (and unexpected) thing started to happen as a result. The poets I had depended on to be an ethical and esthetic alternative to formal religion began turning my imagination, and eventually my heart, back to the very faith I had once rejected. A non-religious writer showed me was another face of belief altogether. It wasn't the faith of rules or dogma, nor of the fear of God's wrath; rather, it was a faith built on awe and wonder and on an almost casually intimate relationship with the Creator, in which all the world might partake, and this relationship grounded in and nurtured by love.

Nor did the words need to speak overtly (or self-consciously) the language of religious faith. It was better sometimes if they didn't. When Emily Dickinson declares that "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul"; or when William Wordsworth talks of an "eye made quiet by the power of harmony and the deep power of joy"; or when Alfred Tennyson observes how "All experience is an arch wherethrough gleams that untraveled world" I came to understand, as though instinctively, that each one was addressing some aspect or movement of the divine. In the beauty of their words, describing the deep and penetrating beauty in the life around them, I rediscovered my faith. I found God, and I found myself again, in these poetic visions and prayers.

This must seem a rather roundabout way of getting to Christmas! But the truth is that during this season I came to feel the effects of my reborn faith most strongly. The grace

and wonder in the poetry I was reading soon connected me to the grace and power (the 'romance'?) of the Gospel, especially in those texts narrating Christ's birth. It wasn't that I found the Christmas story merely charming; it was that I found it life-affirming, life-exalting, a story that gathers in all humanity by reminding us of the strength and reach of God's love, and by showing us that what the world values is not necessarily what God desires.

After all, what could be more poetic than the tale of a humble couple, the woman expecting, kicked out of an inn into a stable only to give birth there to God's Son? What could rival the picture of angels singing to lowly shepherds, or, later, sage-like travelers outsmarting a treacherous king, arriving in time to pay a new and greater king homage? And in what poem could be found a more thrilling or tender witness to mystic contemplation than that of a musing mother who 'treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2:19)?

And where, moreover, could we encounter a more poetic indictment of the vanities and cruelties in human society than in the story of that baby born in a stable who must sleep in a feeding trough, or of that murderous monarch who cannot abide even the thought of a rival to his throne? And yet where are we given a more sublime example of God's love and protection of the poor and vulnerable than in the picture of that same refugee family who find their home under a guiding Star and their future (our future!) in the promise of salvation given to all?

In the end, the Lord Jesus 'called me back' by way of verse and vision, through the poetry of the Gospel that is the story of all our lives. So may the beauty described in its words and the hope enshrined in its message call you back, by poetic grace, to fruitful work in the service of God's Kingdom, especially to the poor and outcast. And may you be filled to the brim with the true joy of Christmas, with a joy and peace only our Savior brings.

Many blessings and a very Merry Christmas!

Fr. Gordon +