

The Anglican Church of Canada



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Archbishop Fred Hiltz
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"But you, O Bethlehem"

At many Christmas Services, there is one carol that is sung by candlelight and most often it is "Silent Night! Holy Night!" But this year I invite you to consider "O Little Town of Bethlehem".

In the opening verse of this much loved carol, Phillips Brooks takes us to that "little town" of whom the Prophet had written,

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.
And he shall stand and feed his flock
in the strength of the Lord,...
And they shall live secure,
For now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace."

(Micah 5: 2, 4-5)

Brooks speaks of the town's stillness and its undisturbed sleep above which "the silent stars go by". Then he speaks of the beautiful light that shines in its streets, as the birth of the Messiah becomes known. As we hold our candle, and focus on this lovely text, we might think of how far a cry the Bethlehem of today is from the stillness and peace of which the carol speaks. Stark images of the massive Separation Wall come to mind, as do images of the heavily guarded check point through which people must pass in and out of the city. In many respects, Brooks' words "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight" are a fitting commentary on the circumstances in which people live there. They live with hope for the peace God intends, however elusive it may be, however challenging to

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negotiate and secure. They live with fear that developments such as the world has witnessed in recent weeks will escalate political tensions in their city, in Jerusalem, Gaza, and throughout the Middle East. So as we hold our candle and sing, we think of all those for whom this "little town" is home, all those who know its history and cling to its destiny in the sight of God.

In the next verse, we are taken right into the manger where "Christ is born of Mary". As we hold our candle we remember the song of the angels and the adoration of the Shepherds. We remember the ancient Church of The Nativity to which thousands and thousands of pilgrims have flocked for centuries. We think of all those who will gather in Manger Square this year awaiting greetings and messages from the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, attesting to the loving purposes of God in Christ. So as we hold our candle, we pray for all for whom this "little town" is a point of departure or destination in pilgrimage, and for their safety and spiritual enrichment.

In the next verse, we are carried into the realms of heaven itself and then swiftly back down to earth again. As we hold our candle, we are reminded of the mystery of the Incarnation.

"How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given
as love imparts to human hearts
the blessings of God's heaven!"

The words of the Prologue to John's Gospel come to mind. "And the Word was made flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) His coming as someone once said is "disguised". It is quiet and kindly. It befriends and redeems the world. It reconciles us with God and with one another. It sanctifies and makes holy our lives and our work. As we hold our candle, we are blessed in hearing yet again this wonderful truth.

"Where meek souls will receive him,
still, the dear Christ enters in."

That we be ready we pray (with our brothers and sisters in Ghana), "Oil the hinges on the doors of our hearts that they may swing gently and easily to welcome him."

And what a lovely segue that is to the final verse of this carol. It is a prayer to the Holy Child that he might indeed "be born in us" and "abide with us" all our days. It is the prayer of all those who in every generation come to know and love Him. It was the prayer of all those now numbered among "all ye citizens of heaven above". It was the prayer of our loved ones who are now in His nearer presence. As we hold

our candle and remember them, we pray for ourselves that we may embrace his Gospel of love for the world and endeavour to fashion our manner of living in accord with its truths and promises.

Well dear friends, I have made my case for choosing “O Little Town of Bethlehem” as the carol to be sung by candlelight this year. If you take up my invitation, I hope your experience like mine, helps you to focus more closely on the text and the story it tells, and the reflections and prayers it summons out of you.

With blessings for a Holy and Peaceful Christmas,

+Jnd