

Christmas in Isolation?

Luke 2:1-7, 8-20

One of the books that I found to be both profound and an utter delight this year is Gavin Francis' *Island Dreams. Mapping an Obsession*. Gavin Francis is an Edinburgh doctor, examines our collective fascination with islands, blending stories of his own travels with psychology, philosophy and great voyages from literature, shedding new light on the importance of islands and isolation in our collective consciousness.

Francis quotes a tale of two sons of the Faroes who grew up to become poets.

One was a lawyer and sailed abroad, living a life which was rich in drama and excitement, but he was homeless and unlucky in love...he sang of the Sirens and the Furies and the incurable wounds of storm-tossed hearts. The other brother stayed in the Faroe Islands with his mother and wife, and sang of happily playing children and the slumbering ducks on the sandy shore by the mouth of the river under the twinkling stars.

The island: a whole world where all the intricacies and complexities of human life are reproduced in miniature? Or a cloister, split off from the world, from industry, from the decisive action of history?...We are all islanders.¹

Yet the poet John Donne, writes,

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Now, some might argue that given the surge of home-cooking and home-baking that surfaced during lockdown, most of us ate enough banana bread and cakes that we were no longer to be considered as islands but as continents. But joking apart, whatever we think about islands, and the isolation that they stand for, this passing year of 2020 has made islands of most of us one way or another. Locked down with family members, or on our own, we have had a taste of what it is like to be cut off, or shut up, away from the worlds that most of us move in.

For some of us this has come with a realisation that this way of living, whilst giving us a chance to pause, reflect and reorder our lives and living, has also, as the months have ground by, led to an intense sense of loneliness, of lack of purpose and something akin to bereavement. We've maybe also realised something else: this is how many people before Covid already lived. For many people, young and old, these days of lockdown were no different from what they normally experienced.

In Church, what we have normally experienced has been absent. Worship with its teaching and music, restored in August, but still no singing for congregations. And the 'soft' side of the way we live our faith: teas and coffees after services, Christmas mulled wine, coffee mornings and Friday Speaker Suppers, the summer afternoon tea and other gatherings, for young and old alike, that shape us as a community, that shape us as human.

As we hear the familiar stories from the Bible about the first Christmas, and remember the words of the familiar carols, what might strike us is that cold sense of isolation and exclusion in them. Shepherds out in their fields, untouchable to polite Jewish society because of the work they did. Wise men, riding through the vast, empty expanses of Arabian desert. King Herod, away from his courtiers, pacing up and down in his lonely, paranoid room. The guiding star, alone in its heaven. Angels in the cold, separated night air, far away from the earth to which they were bound. Even Mary and Joseph and Jesus, in the midst of a crowded town, unable to find a space to rest with other people, finding themselves isolated in a stable. To sanitise the Bible stories around the birth of Jesus and to make them sweet, comfortable and cosy is to do them a disservice. Isolation runs right through the heart of the nativity stories.

But that's not all that runs through those. And nor is it what has run through this bleak 2020. I could tell **you** about, and you could tell **me** about, stories of kindness and sacrifice and reaching out and helping. More than just clapping on doorsteps to show support for the NHS, people have decided in different ways to support charities, and groups and individuals in a way that did not happen before. Those isolated on islands of frailty, or loneliness, or fearfulness, or hunger, or poverty have, now connected up to the society within which they were isolated.

Of course charity work was going on before, but I wonder how many people, not cold and uncaring, but made unobservant by busy-ness and the speed of modern life were forced to slow down, and look around, and see who their neighbours were, and what their neighbours needed, or what their neighbours already did to help others, but no-one had noticed, or heard? I know in my street, two charities, one a foodbank, one a clothing store, were raised to prominence and people said, 'We didn't know.' In the awareness raising, maybe in small ways, those who were isolated were connected. Those who were excluded were included. Those who were struggling were helped. In this city, and I suspect in cities, towns and villages all across the country. Will this last, this isolation-busting altruism that has been enabled by lockdown and Covid? Or when the pace picks up and we resume our busy, self-absorbed lives, not making us bad people but making us time-poor and less observant, will the isolated ones who have come to the foreground in this time of crisis, slip without trace beneath the sea of loneliness that is the mark of this century? Time will tell.

This Christmas Eve, I miss being in a packed church, singing familiar carols, and sensing the anticipation. Recording a service, and using technology to bring it to those able to watch is good. But you know and I know that it is not the same. It feels isolated, we are not together.

Yet we must make the most of what we can, and perhaps this Christmas, keeping things simple, and low key, **will** remind us of the warm heart of this time, and the promise of hope that the coming of Jesus to the world continues to offer. His promise was one of welcome, and acceptance, of mercy and respect, of peace and tenderness. His teaching goes on to encourage us to love God and to love our neighbours; to look upwards and outwards at the world around us, and where we can, to reach out, and help, and recognise, **and connect**. Whenever you watch this recording, after it is over, send that email, or better, make that telephone call; or walk down your street and post a card, or simply wave at anyone you meet and wish them a happy Christmas. It seems pretty simple, but it could mean a simple bridge between the islands of our lives, and even for that moment, making a connection with someone for whom this could mean all the

difference in the world. Let's make this not an isolated Christmas, but a connected one. Yes it's simple, but the first Christmas was pretty simple. It's all right if yours is too.

May God bless you, every one, in this Christmas time, and in the New Year that is to come.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Gavin Francis, *Island Dreams. Mapping an Isolation*, p205, 231