

[In The Bleak Midwinter... \(December 2015\)](#)

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By Rev Paul Graham

“Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat,” the old nursery rhyme tells us and the first part is certainly inescapable. Though I’m writing this in the middle of November, the commercialised anticipation of Christmas is in full swing. Questions abound: which high street store has the best advert on TV; which toy will be the biggest seller; what soap storyline will dominate the schedules and how will we cope in the post-Downton Abbey world that approaches so swiftly?

And yet this is all put into some sort of perspective at a time where the whole world is reeling from a spate of recent atrocities: a Russian plane crash in Sinai, suicide bombers in Nigeria, Beirut and Paris, ongoing conflict in Syria, Ukraine and countless other hotspots, many of which don’t even create headlines. The world seems to be descending into madness, fuelled by intolerance, hatred and division. Where once buildings and communities stood as testimonies to diversity and cross-cultural living there are now ruins and masked soldiers delighting in destruction.

With such a bleak picture painted, where, you might ask, is the Christmas cheer? How does mistletoe and wine and all the trappings of Christmas fit in with this grim reality that we’re facing?

And yet that’s precisely the point. Jesus, born in poverty, born into a world of oppression and racial tension; where freedom of religious expression was tolerated, but only under strict rules enforced by death threats and torture. Jesus, born into a world where suspicion reigned; where the rich grew richer and the poor suffered because of it. Jesus, born into a world where injustice could be found at every turn, where corruption was rewarded by the ruling elite and the marginalised weren’t allowed a voice.

Jesus, the hope of the world, born into a world that shows that two millennia of experience hasn’t taught us very much.

And yet... Had Jesus not been born we would be in an even worse state. The world would be much darker, much bleaker; always winter and never Christmas, as C. S. Lewis put it. But, with Jesus’ birth comes the promise of something different, something brighter: a light that shines despite all attempts to snuff it out. Jesus’ birth rewrote the rules because it was the start of his life-long journey to bring us home. With his birth, the chain of events commenced that ultimately led to all humanity being given the opportunity to rejoin the family that God first designed us to be. With his birth, humanity was given hope.

But what is this hope? Is it some sort of wishful thinking, a blind optimism that creates a feeling of well-being as we slalom down towards inevitable destruction?

Of course not. It’s hope that was born in a stable, but doesn’t end there. It’s hope that travels all the way to the cross, through death and into resurrected life. It’s hope that promises new life with the same certainty that the strains of “Auld Lang Syne” at midnight will herald the start of 2016. It’s absolute, unshakeable and even death in all its many forms cannot smother it.

It’s also now and not yet – complete and yet also incomplete. We are not the finished articles; our hope is that Jesus isn’t finished with us yet, but keeps renewing us and transforming us by his Spirit. And yet our hope is also that Jesus has already accomplished all that he needed to by dying and being raised again. Hope was realised at the first Easter-time and is still being realised in our everyday walk with Jesus.

Hope that was both finished and yet-to-be-finished was seen on the first Christmas morning; in the midst of the poverty and the conflict, the shepherds, angels and wise men all celebrated the birth of a baby. Not the inauguration of a king; nor the triumph of a victor, strong and mighty, powerfully overthrowing the Roman authorities and restoring the glory of Israel as had been long hoped for. Not even the empty tomb on Easter morning, with a risen Jesus having fulfilled all that he set out to do in redeeming a fallen world. Instead, they celebrated the birth of a baby, helpless and prone to all the many diseases that claimed so many young lives in first century Palestine.

But they recognised something in that baby that gave them hope. Hope that the future didn't look so bleak, didn't look so dreadful or doom laden. Hope for the present and hope for the future. And so, as we go into the New Year, with all that it might contain, we go in hope: hope that will sustain us for today and a sure and certain hope that awaits us in the future.

Wishing you all a hope-filled Christmas!