

22nd December 2020

Inches

**“How far is it to Bethlehem, not very far?
Shall we find the stable room lit by a star?
Can we see the little child, is He within?
If we lift the wooden latch, may we go in?”**

Frances Chesterton, How Far Is It To Bethlehem? (1917)

Bethlehem is closer to Jerusalem than one might imagine, near enough to feel like a suburb of a big city. But Chesterton’s words aren’t really about distance. They’re about time and intent. It’s not how far away Bethlehem is that matters but how close we are to understanding the message of love and hope its story signifies. There’s still a long way to go before our world fully grasps the meaning and purpose of the Christmas message. We’re doing no more than inching ever closer.

Hundreds of years ago, most measurements were based on parts of the body or other natural items that were consistent in size. The “inch” comes from the Latin *uncia*, meaning “one twelfth part”, which is, for this measurement, one twelfth a foot. The width of the average male thumb at the middle knuckle approximated to one twelfth of the length of the average male foot. (I have an odd picture in my mind of six average men struggling to get their thumb knuckles in line on the sole of the foot of one average guy so that the measurement could be confirmed!) That’s why in French, Spanish, Dutch, Czech, Slovak, and a host of other languages, the word for “thumb” and “inch” are pretty much the same. But, of course, thumbs vary in size. So King Edward II had it defined in statute in 1324 that the length of the inch would be “three grains of barley, dried and round, placed end to end, lengthwise”. So there! We’re not just “inching” to Bethlehem, we’re “barleycornering” there, it seems.

But is that not a good thing? We need time to think of the impact on our own lives of arriving at Bethlehem. Our world needs to think carefully of the implication of the meaning that is waiting for us. And, once we’re there, we’ll need to ponder what message we take with us when we leave Bethlehem and journey on into 2021. How far are we away from grasping the effect of that, I wonder?

A prayer for today

Lord, let every inch of my journey bring me closer to your purpose for me. Amen.

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