

23rd December 2023

Bethlehem

**"I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon, and the stars, and the sun,
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth;
At Bethlehem I had my birth.**

**Dance, then, wherever you may be,
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he."**

Sydney Carter, Lord of the Dance

There will be no dancing in Bethlehem this year. Christmas celebrations in and around Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity have been cancelled, because Bethlehem sits in the Palestinian territory of the West Bank.

Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity is a sacred site for the two-and-a-half million Christians around the world. It was built on top of the cave where it's believed Jesus was born. Normally, there would be thousands of people filing in and out of the church, and the church's environs would be crammed with thousands more. Manger Square, right outside the church, is traditionally the focal point of Christmas celebrations. But not even the COVID-19 pandemic could reduce it to what it is now. No people, no tree, no lights, no nativity scene. "It's like a desert," a local Palestinian Christian tells us. "I have never seen Bethlehem in my life like that."

As I've been searching for humanity this year in our sanitised Christmas, I weep again at the hellishness to which humanity can descend. If there is to be no dancing in Bethlehem, physical or metaphorical, what dance do I have to join in with? Gone are the lightness of my steps, to be replaced with the lumbering strides of grief. Gone is the music of celebration, to be replaced with the dirges of mourning. Gone are the skips and reels of the dance, to be replaced with the emptiness of my dancefloor. And if this "Thought for the Day" is a gloomy one, then so be it, for this is how I feel two days before Christmas this year.

Will it always be so? No, it won't, for the Incarnation transcends even the worst of human ills. Do I have the right to enjoy myself this Christmas? Yes I do, but not, and never, to the exclusion of humanity's hellishness, and the people in Bethlehem who struggle to make sense of it all.

A prayer for today

"Wherever you may be" today, remember Bethlehem, as it was, and as it is now.

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