

Advent Reflection: Signs of Hope



As 2020 draws to a close, we've reached that time of year when we begin to look back. Unpacking old decorations provokes stories from Christmases past. Carols and festive songs remind us of special gatherings with loved ones. And before too long, TV and newspapers will start reviewing this 'unprecedented' year.

For Christians, the four weeks before Christmas are known as Advent, and the Bible readings we hear in the season of Advent also encourage us to look back and reflect on another 'unprecedented' event. An event which happened 2000 years ago, during a time of challenge when – the Bible tells us – people walked in darkness, longing for signs of light and hope.

This has also been a year when people have needed signs of hope. Perhaps the most obvious were the rainbows that displayed our gratitude for the courage and compassion of our NHS and key workers.

We've needed these signs because 2020 has not been easy for any of us. For many it's been incredibly difficult. Some people went through lockdown feeling terribly lonely. Some have experienced illness and loss. Some have known the sadness of family conflict. Some continue to feel anxious about the months ahead.

Now as a very different Christmas approaches, with us distanced from loved ones and unable to take part in our usual Christmas traditions, there's a risk these feelings may once again revisit. So, it's really important we remember the things that helped us stay hopeful over the worst months of 2020. Things like music, exercise, playing, talking, writing, reading, volunteering, prayer, faith.

Nature also lifts our spirits. And although the bleak winter months may not appear to offer as much hope as the sunshine and flowers of the summer, there is one annual visitor to our parks and gardens who can teach us a lot about doing our bit to fan the flame of hope.

Any guesses who this visitor is? Without its most distinctive feature this little visitor could easily be overlooked. It's the robin. And this is the story of how it acquired its distinctive red breast.

Legend has it that on that first Christmas night the temperatures dropped in Bethlehem, and the air became bitterly cold. The small fire that burned in the middle of the stable was nearly out, and Mary began to worry as the baby Jesus shivered in her arms.

Joseph had gone to find firewood and, in his absence, Mary turned to the animals about her and asked for help. The strong ox lay sound asleep on the stable floor and did not hear her. Nor did the hardworking donkey, or the stately horse. Mary wondered what to do.

Suddenly she heard the fluttering of wings and looking up, she saw a small, plain, brown-coloured bird fly into the stall. The bird went directly over to the dying fire and began to flap his wings hard.

His tiny wings acted like little bellows, puffing air onto the embers, until they glowed bright red again. The bird continued to fan the fire, singing all the while, until the ashes began to kindle.

Then with his beak, the bird began picking up dry sticks and dropping them into the fire. As he did, a flame burst forth and burned the little bird's breast bright red. But he simply continued to feed the fire until it crackled brightly and warmed the entire stable. The Baby Jesus slept happily.

Mary thanked the bird for his selfless act. Then she looked tenderly at his red breast, burned by the flame, and promised the robin that from now on his red breast would be a reminder of how he saved Jesus from the bitter cold, and a sign to the world of the hope that acts of kindness bring.

The legend of the robin teaches us a valuable lesson – not to be overwhelmed by the size of the mission in front of us, or to think ourselves too small to make a difference. Rather, **we** must do what **we** can to bring hope to the world.

Soon we'll remember the beginnings of another unlikely saviour. A small baby, born in a poor stable, to unknown parents from an ordinary town, who from his birth became the greatest sign of hope the world had ever seen. Whose arrival, or advent, had been dreamed about for centuries, as revealed in this Bible reading by prophet Isaiah, written 700 years before the first Christmas:

'The people who walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone... For there is a child born for us, a son given to us, and authority is laid on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'¹ Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

This unlikely sign of hope has, for over 2000 years, inspired billions of others to bring light to the world too. Like the many missionaries, providing practical and spiritual help in places of conflict and poverty; like the staff here in this school, who have worked so hard this year to help you grow in knowledge; like our key workers and NHS staff, whose courage and compassion we remembered with rainbows.

And what about you? Will you be inspired to be a sign of hope to others? Will you use the lessons learned in lockdown, the things that helped you to cope, to support others this Christmas and beyond? For example:

- If talking helped you, will you provide a listening ear for others this winter?
- If words helped you, will you write a Christmas letter or card for an isolated neighbour or relative?
- If a charity helped you, could you give something yourself to provide charity for others?
- If praying helped you, will you pray for missionaries who risk their lives to share faith & love with all?

There are so many **little** things that you can do, that will make a **big** difference to somebody else. Let's finish with a prayer, asking Christ to encourage us to fan the flame of hope and faith in our world. **Our Father...**

***ADVENT CALL TO ACTION: FESTIVE FACEMASKS**

During the global lockdown, Missio responded with an emergency Covid appeal. Funds raised helped impoverished communities around the world. In Cameroon, internal conflict means that the official pandemic response was inadequate. Thanks to Missio's support, St Jude's Parish began educating people about the virus: providing the local community with soap, clean water, sanitiser and thousands of masks. Their efforts became a sign of hope.

Inspired by St Jude's parish could your students turn functional facemasks into festive signs of hope and joy! Could you hold a **Festive Facemask** competition? Entries must be homemade – that is, normal masks decorated by the students themselves. Students pay for entry with the total donated to Missio. Ask the school management team to judge and Governors to provide a tempting prize. Share your facemask signs of hope wider than your school community by sending photos to your local newspaper and to us education2@missio.org.uk or tweet @MissioUK.

The money you donate to Missio will provide **ongoing** support to communities like St Jude's. Thank you.