

Peace on Earth?

Can the angels' Christmas song ever become a reality?

When I was ten I was sent to an odd little school in the wilds of Devon with just 30 girls (and several ponies). Like many of her generation, the headmistress never married because, we girls gathered, she had lost the man she loved in the Great War. So she had become a teacher and started her school, carrying it on all through the Second World War and into the 1950s, when I arrived. She was a formidable woman. Though thoroughly English, she would terrify our country parents by rushing out to greet them gabbling at them in French, and every Christmas term every girl in the school had to learn to recite in French Luke's story of the angels appearing to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus. *Or il y avait*, we called it, because that was how it began: *Or il y avait dans ces contrées-là des bergers...* Our headmistress was right: many things you learn by heart when young stay with you. Sixty years on, thinking in bed late at night about writing this Editorial, I found I could still remember it word for word with its tremendous climax of an *army of angels appearing in the heavens and singing Peace on Earth: Et au même instant il y eut avec l'ange une multitude de l'armée céleste louant Dieu et disant: Gloire à Dieu dans les lieux très hauts, Paix sur la Terre et pour les hommes bienveillance.* Sixty years on we still do not have peace on Earth but wars and weapons all over the place, particularly in the Middle East.

The child whose birth the angels announced is called *Prince of Peace*, and *Emmanuel* meaning 'God with us'. In a sense this story of God coming *down to Earth* is about *bringing home* to us what has always been the case. God is nowhere else. 'God' has been used as a 'supernaturalisation' (a poetic trope akin to personification or metaphor) of beings and forces of Cosmos and Earth, from which we evolved, and forces in us, including the moral forces – some still in a rudimentary state – such as love and kindness. That baby, to whom the shepherds bow down, is the hero, the supreme representative of the 'human form divine', which has the *potential* to bring about a world of justice and peace. But it is up to us to make it happen, or as the young say nowadays, down to us.

The Divine Vision still was seen,
Still was the Human Form Divine,
Weeping in weak and mortal clay,
O Jesus, still the Form was thine.

And thine the Human Face, and thine
The Human Hands and Feet and Breath,
Entering through the Gates of Birth
And passing through the Gates of Death.

The story tells us that *every* child, born into any circumstances, however unpropitious, embodies 'the human form divine'. *Every* child is a reason – *logos* – why peace on Earth is so urgent. And anyone who has given birth, attended a birth or seen a newborn baby feels something of that 'great mystery'.

Jesus, whose birth the angels announced singing 'Peace on Earth', grew up to weep over Jerusalem's lack of peace. 'As a hen gathers her chicks' he longed to gather it together. 'And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!"' (Lk 19:41). He entered the city and was executed as a subversive. He had taught: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.' (Mt. 5:9)

This Christmas issue of *Sofia* is called *Peace on Earth?* With a question mark. We sometimes feel so helpless about what we can do for peace. That sense of powerlessness became outrage when on February 15th 2003 the largest peace demonstration London had ever seen (and in many other cities) was completely ignored by our Government and quickly followed by an invasion called *Shock and Awe*.

The least we can do is keep ourselves informed and become part of that public opinion that demands and longs for peace. For this issue we have invited four peace campaigners to write about the areas in which they are active and the prospects there. Mike Phipps is an activist with Iraq Occupation Focus and co-editor of its fortnightly e-newsletter. Gabriel Carlyle is Afghanistan news editor for *Peace News*. He will be speaking about Afghanistan at the *Peace News* Winter Gathering in Nottingham, 15-17th January 2010. Tony Klug has written extensively about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for nearly 40 years, is a special advisor on the Middle East to the Oxford Research Group and vice chair of the Arab-Jewish Forum. Two works by him are reviewed in this issue by Michael Morton. Bruce Kent has been a leader and outstanding figure in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament for decades. *Sofia* is grateful and proud to publish their contributions.

Perhaps some readers will be inspired to do more than just read (some will already be doing more). War is wasteful. We weep for all the thousands killed, maimed and made homeless in war zones and for our own soldiers – very young in some cases – who die, or come home without comrades or mutilated or driven mad. There is no supernatural agency to bring about peace on Earth. It is down to us.