

‘Beneath the paper wrappings’ by Clare Stainsby (Singing the Faith 129)

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Beneath the paper wrappings, there's an open stable door,
beneath the fir tree trappings, there's a welcome and there's more.
Beyond the tinsel fairy is a presence that's divine,
there's a child to change the future, turning water into wine.

Look inside, look above, look beyond and see the love,
look inside and you will see.
Look inside, look below, look beyond, and you will know,
the one who came to give his life for you and me.

The miracle of childbirth now reveals God's only Son,
a miracle beginning that continues on and on.
The stable holds the echo of the tomb that's yet to be,
on the manger lies the shadow of the cross he's yet to see.

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As the weeks draw closer to Christmas the pressure is always on leaders of worship within our churches to come up with something creative whilst making sure that we sing all the carols we know and love!

In my experience our carols fall into three broad categories: The first type, such as ‘Angels from the realms of glory’, tells of several elements of the Christmas story as we have received it: the shepherds, the ‘wise men’, the Holy Family... These carols can be extremely useful for summarising Christmas, but can be somewhat of a nightmare if you are trying to place the said carol into an order of sequential lessons and carols.

The second category, including for example ‘While Shepherds watched their flocks by night’, aids the flow of a nativity-type service by concentrating on one aspect of the story that closely echoes the scriptures. Finally, hymns such as ‘Born in the night’, give a nod toward the Christmas story but try to help the singer, hearer and reader to think through and beyond the narrative to what God might actually have been up to.

Clare Stainsby’s carol ‘Beneath the paper wrappings’ falls into this third category. I first came across it in the 1999 Methodist Publishing collection for children, *Love Shone Down*. It may well have been written as a children’s song but it deserves attention from a wider audience. In two short verses and a chorus, Clare cleverly takes us beyond the reality of Christmas in Britain today – of wrapping paper, tinsels and fir trees topped with fairies – to marvel at the presence of the divine in a stable in Bethlehem. Then, in the next phrase, we are encouraged to acknowledge the potential that God offers in that moment: ‘there’s a child to change the future, turning water into wine’.

Verse two focuses our attention on miracle. Not just the supernatural fact that God wants to be part of human lives, but also the *super-natural* fact which is the gift of every human birth. Clare reminds us that life has a beginning and end – and that for Jesus, like so many, the end was to come sooner than our natural inclinations wish for.

If the verses move us from today to two thousand years ago, from life to death in only eight lines, the chorus does something to the human soul that seems to bring a smile and maybe even a tear to a congregation's faces. Look, look everywhere, it declares – and with the right eyes you will see God.

We could spend time reflecting on what it means to look inside, above, beyond etc. Maybe, however, more attention should be given to the last line: 'He came to give his life for you and me'. Of course, we can see this in the literal sense. Jesus gave his life for us all on the cross, for you and for me, but I think we could give it more attention than that. In what other ways did Jesus give his life for you and me? He gave us a way of being attentive to God his Father. He gave us a way of prayer, and a way to approach our world with a prayerful attitude. He gave us a way of seeing the other, particularly the marginalized in our society, which raises them far above human understanding. He gave an understanding that our loving God wants us to live our lives to the fullest potential – however long or short that might be. He gave us.... the list goes on.

I'm not wanting to over-claim the virtues of this carol – but I certainly want to commend it to a Church that too often slips into ways of doing things 'because we've always done it that way', and to the communities beyond our church doors that might only focus on the paper wrappings.

If you can't fit this carol into your usual Christmas acts of worship – though I'm sure you could – why not suggest another alternative carol service to your church? If neither of these is possible, why not try unpacking this carol in your own prayer time each week in Advent, reflecting on each place (inside, above, below, beyond) that the chorus suggests to look?

And as you look and reflect, praise God that there is more to this season than the stuff that will be thrown out with the recycling.

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