

CHRISTMAS DAY 2016 St George's Windsor

"For One in Bethlehem / Has kept their dreams safe for them." The words come from a poem by Patrick Kavanagh, the twentieth century Irish poet, not to be confused with the later twentieth century English poet P. J. Kavanagh. "For One in Bethlehem / Has kept their dreams safe for them."

Patrick Kavanagh was born in Iniskeen in County Monaghan in the year 1904. He left school at the age of thirteen, and was apprenticed to his father, a shoemaker and farmer. So far as poetry is concerned, Patrick was largely self-educated. If I remember correctly, his enchantment with the possibilities of verse began when he was still at school, but the poetic gift was to grow slowly, though surely, within him. In due course, he was thought of as one of Ireland's greatest poets. In **The Irish Times** on 21st October 2004, to mark the hundredth anniversary of Kavanagh's birth, Seamus Heaney wrote of him: "...he was a poet of pure spiritual force". Marrying late in life, and after much serious illness, and maybe too much taking to the bottle at certain times, he died in 1967 at the age of 63.

On 23rd December 1939, one of his poems was published in the **Irish Independent**. It is called **Christmas Eve Remembered** and I have chosen it for my Christmas sermon poem this year. From it come the words that I quoted just now: "For One in Bethlehem / Has kept their dreams safe for them." But let me begin at the beginning.

At the start of his poem, Patrick Kavanagh, in his mind's eye, revisits a childhood Christmas Eve and sees his neighbours in the Monaghan parish, "poor parish!", "going to the Chapel / To confess their sins". He confesses that "memory does weave / For me about those folk / A romantic cloak".

On their way to church, they gossip with each other. "They may be talking of the turkey markets / Or foreign politics" but, says our poet, "to-night / Their plain, hard country words / Are Christ's singing birds". Somehow, even ordinary conversation takes on an air of wonder, of something hushed and religious, as they wend their way to a holy place.

A little later, after he has recollected "Bicycles scoot by" and "Old women / Cling to the grass margin:" he notes: "Their thoughts are earthy, but their minds move / In dreams of the Blessed Virgin / For One in Bethlehem / Has kept their dreams safe for them".

In the poem, we hear more snatches of their conversation: about their families; about the fact that "These are the dark days"; about this year's turnover in Maguire's business; and then "'I can't delay now, Jem, / Lest I be late for Bethlehem.'"

Patrick Kavanagh paints a fine picture of those early twentieth century Irish village folk as they wend their way to church on Christmas Eve, their minds much occupied with the affairs and cares of the day, but also, along with their hearts, drawing them to rediscover the mystery disclosed in a vulnerable child; drawing them to the "one in Bethlehem" who "Has kept their dreams safe for them".

Perhaps, we warm to the poem because we catch sight of ourselves in those country folk from County Monaghan. Much of our conversation on the way to church this morning will have been about members of the family, the state of the economy; the fact that "'These are the dark

days". Our minds will have been cluttered with the affairs and cares of the time. But something has lured us to celebrate again the birth of Jesus Christ, and we might even admit to ourselves that we are among those people who believe that he "Has kept their dreams safe for them".

Dreams are so easily forgotten in the harsh light of day and, even when half-remembered, they are difficult to get a purchase on in words. But an enduring human dream, it seems to me, is the dream that, in spite of all the cruelty and chaos that we see around us, love will have the final word; that love, for all its apparent weakness and fragility, will outlast all else.

Many dismiss this dream as nothing more than fantasy; a narcotic to numb our feeling of despair at the world in which we live. Christians however take a different view. We believe that, in and through the birth and life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, God has spoken to us; has declared that his nature is love; has promised us therefore that love will prevail. To trust this promise is not to give in to sentimental fantasy but rather to take hold of the profoundest reality.

And being inspired by this promise does not allow us to wallow in any saccharine religiosity, but rather to take love as our compass point, our guiding star, as we negotiate the often tough complexities of living in what people choose to call 'the real world'.

Here is a dream worth dreaming for the sake of that world. We celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ because, in showing us the Father, he has safeguarded that dream for us, and promised that it will come true.

Just now, in making a journey through that poem by Patrick Kavanagh, **Christmas Eve Remembered**, I did not quite take you to the end; to the final verse. It is, like the four preceding it, six lines long. The first three lines assure us that what he has described is what he has remembered. "Like this my memory saw, / Like this my childhood heard / These pilgrims of the North.....". And the second three lines say something of the effect that this memory has had on him. "And memory you have me spared / A light to follow them / Who go to Bethlehem." Remembering his neighbours of Iniskeen in County Monaghan all those years ago, he finds awakened in himself a desire "to follow them / Who go to Bethlehem". Maybe we might reflect, this Christmas morning, on all those whom we have known down through the years who, finding that the "One in Bethlehem" has "kept their dreams safe for them" encourage us to join their company, and to go on dreaming.

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