

## **CHRISTMAS DAY 2017**

### **St George's Chapel Windsor Castle**

The poet Louis MacNeice was born in 1907, one hundred and ten years ago, and died, shortly before his 56<sup>th</sup> birthday, in 1963. I suppose he is best remembered as being one of the Auden, Spender, Day-Lewis circle; poets of the 'Thirties'. However, like those other poets, he is much more than that.

Louis MacNeice was born in Belfast. His father was a Church of Ireland minister, soon to become Rector of Carrickfergus, where Louis was to spend much of his childhood. His father was later to become an archdeacon, and then a bishop. Louis was brought up in a decidedly religious environment.

He went to Sherborne Preparatory School, Marlborough Public School, and then to Merton College Oxford. During this time, though it took him a while to be open about it with his father, Louis's Christian faith evaporated. He became, for the rest of his life, an agnostic. I suppose that experience is quite common.

I said that MacNeice was a poet. I do not know very much about his poetry but I did, a little while ago, light on one of his poems that I found intriguing. It is called simply **Carol**. I think it tells you quite a lot about the man.

The first two verses find him walking through a cloister (perhaps a symbol of an ancient and possibly now ruined faith) reflecting on the fact that belief has become a thing of the past.

**To end all carols, darling,  
To end all carols now,  
Let us walk through the cloister  
With a thoughtful brow,**

**Pruning what was grafted  
Through ages of blind faith –  
The rubrics and the finials  
Drift away like breath.**

He remembers how, out of the Christmas story, there once grew great edifices – cathedrals, churches and abbeys – themselves no doubt pointers to the great edifice of Christian doctrine.

**From Bethlehem the sheep-bells  
Grew to a steepled peel,  
The joists of the stable  
Spread an ashlar chill,  
The rafters of the stable  
Hooped themselves on high  
And coveys of boys' voices  
Burst on a stone sky;**

so, says the poet, it once was. Now all has faded. Why bother any more to sing carols?

**Beyond our prayers and knowing,  
Many light years away –**

**So why sing carols, darling?  
Today is today.**

That for him, as it is for many people, might have been the end of the matter; Christian faith jettisoned, and replaced by rationalism and materialism.

**So why sing carols, darling?  
Today is today.**

But something in the poet's heart and mind resists this conclusion. Even though he cannot accept all that stuff about the Son of God, he yet rebels against any kind of diminishment of what he considers to be his 'humanity'.

**Then answered the angel  
Today is today  
And the Son of God is vanished  
But the sons of men stay**

**And man is a spirit  
And symbols are his meat,  
So pull not down the steeple  
In your monied street.**

**For money chimes feebly,  
Matter dare not sing –  
Man is a spirit,  
Let the bells ring.**

For Louis MacNeice, though he has ceased to embrace the faith of his childhood, there is genuine reluctance to turn his back entirely on religion. Through the old traditions, something continues to resonate. A chord continues to be struck. A need to be reminded that human beings do not live by bread alone continues to be satisfied. A hunger to be more 'human' is aroused.

**And man is a spirit  
And symbols are his meat,  
So pull not down the steeple  
In your monied street.**

This stirring of some rudimentary impulse, a hunger to be more human, is hardly to be claimed as Christian faith. Neither however can it be ignored. The seeking of it, perhaps even the 'longing' for it, is often what draws not-particularly-religious people to church on Christmas Day.

For some it can even be a new beginning. The recognition that it is our true humanity that we wish to remember, cherish and preserve, will sometimes lure us back to Jesus Christ as one who seems to define that 'true humanity'. In his life of self-giving love we see all that we intuit we were ever meant to be. Even as we might shrug off the trappings of our childhood faith, his 'humanity' commands our attention.

When that turns out to be the case, we cannot help but ask: How came about the 'shaping', the formation of this man Jesus Christ? And it might dawn upon us that his eyes were always focussed on a far horizon, above and beyond the outward show of things; that it was a constant longing for the mystery whom some name 'God' that made him what he was; made him, you might say, 'genuinely human'.

Moreover, so captivated was he by his vision of this 'God' that it seemed as though he mirrored and revealed the one for whom his heart quite naturally longed. It was 'as if' this God was 'made flesh' in him, and revealed to the world as One who reaches out to us, as Jesus Christ did to others in his daily life, in reassuring love.

It is of course God's being 'made flesh' in him that Christians celebrate at Christmas. Our hankering after true humanity has led us to gaze upon the life of Jesus, and to ponder the possibility that it is only in giving our hearts to the One whose glory shone through him that we shall ever really come to ourselves.

**And man is a spirit  
And symbols are his meat,  
So pull not down the steeple  
In your monied street.**

'Pull not down the steeple / In your monied street' for the stirring of some rudimentary impulse (some hunger to be more human) in the hearts of many who thought faith a thing of the past, might well be the beginning, if only the beginning, of some new walking in, and embracing of, the Christian way. Those bells and that carolling might be the cause of a kind of re-awakening. As Christians believe that God has reached out to us in and through the life of Jesus Christ, so it just might be that God reaches out to us today, through the steeples of our monied streets, to penetrate and heal our bewilderment, confusion and unbelief.

**And man is a spirit  
And symbols are his meat,  
So pull not down the steeple  
In your monied street.**

**For money chimes feebly,  
Matter dare not sing –  
Man is a spirit,  
Let the bells ring.**

**Ring all your changes, darling,  
Save us from the slough,  
Begin all carols, darling,  
Begin all carols now.**

**The Right Reverend David Conner, KCVO**