

CHRISTMAS DAY 2021
St George's Windsor

One of the best-loved Christmas Carols is surely, 'It came upon the midnight clear, That glorious song of old'. The words were written about a hundred and fifty years ago by an American Unitarian parish minister called Edmund Sears. The first verse describes the singing angels as "bending near the earth / To touch their harps of gold". It is as though, as the shepherds look upwards, the veil between heaven and earth is lifted, and God's desire for His world clearly heard: "Peace on the earth, good-will to men"

I do not suppose that Edmund Sears would have imagined that, well over a century after he composed his verses, another poet on this side of the Atlantic would refer to his carol in one of her own poems. Yet in 1992, in a volume of poetry called **Living With Mystery**, the poet Kathleen Raine did just that in a poem called **Christmas Again**.

In the first part of this work, Kathleen Raine looks back from her old age to her childhood Christmas experience. She writes:

'Angels bending near the earth' – long, long ago
These words were mingled, real
As the forest fragrance of the Christmas Tree
Where angels of tinsel and dreams with their harps of gold
Hung in the evergreen.

For her, the "angels bending near the earth" were as "real / As the forest fragrance of the Christmas Tree". The veil between heaven and earth was lifted and, in a manner that was bound to be childlike, she was in touch with a mystery that hinted at (though she could not know it) a deeper reality.

I think that will resonate with many of us as we look back upon our childhood days.

In her poem, Kathleen Raine then goes on to mention what happened as she got older. Of the angels and their song, she writes:

Then they over the years
Became imaginary, dwindled
Into the unreality of this world's forgetfulness.

As she grew into adulthood, so the veil dropped. No more angels singing. They are jettisoned to the world of make-believe and fantasy. In our mechanistic, managerial,

materialistic, down-to-earth world, there is no room for the mystery or wonder that once hinted at a deeper reality. Such is forgotten.

I think we shall recognise this state of being. I think also that, as we do so, we shall feel a sense of loss. Life is somehow flatter than it should be. We are less fulfilled.

For Kathleen Raine however, this is the second stage of the three stages of her life. Late in that life, she writes:

But now at the end of time
Memory makes those imagined angels true
Likenesses of the invisible
Harmonies we do not hear, but are –
Music of multitude of singing stars.

Towards the end of her life, she seems to have recaptured something of her childhood awareness. The veil is lifted once again and, though she will express it in new terms, she is now in touch with the mystery that hints at a deeper reality.

As we read her poem, we feel a certain relief at this restoration of at least a kind of faith. We are encouraged to believe that what we thought we had lost forever is recoverable. We perhaps surprise ourselves by knowing all at once that this is what we hanker after. We hope for the lifting of the veil that we too might be put in touch again with some mystery that hints at a deeper reality. We are dissatisfied with our lives; those lives of “unreality” and “forgetfulness”.

It can be that such dissatisfaction tugs us along to church on a Christmas morning. Maybe the hearing of the Christmas story and the singing of a Christmas carol will rekindle something that we once knew in childhood. Perhaps the veil can be lifted even for us. Perhaps, even for us, the rift between heaven and earth can be healed.

We cannot know. We cannot tell. These things are not in our own hands alone. But we can pray. And we can listen to others who, through the Christmas story, have found new faith. What they say is that they have seen, often quite suddenly, that it is in Jesus Christ that the veil has been fully lifted. It is through the mystery of Jesus Christ that we perceive the deeper reality that all other mystery hints at. It is through Jesus Christ that we see that the ultimate reality is love.

They have said that, if you really want the veil to be lifted, if you really want to be in touch with a mystery that hints at a deeper reality, go on looking at Jesus Christ until you ‘see’.

Some would say of course that this is all self-indulgence; all rather sentimental. It is a way of escaping from what they call ‘the real world’. But, to bring to an end this

sermon, let me return to Edmund Sears, the author, you will remember, of 'It came upon the midnight clear'. In his carol, mentioned by Kathleen Raine in her poem, he describes the lifting of the veil between earth and heaven that made it possible for the shepherds to hear the angels' song heralding the reign of love: "Peace on the earth, good-will to men". Sears received those words as the challenge and inspiration of that 'deeper reality'. In the course of his ministry, he fought hard for the abolition of slavery, and he courageously challenged the slave owners. The veil being lifted, does not mean only that we keep our heads and hearts in heaven. It means too that we strive to be channels of heaven's coming on earth.

All this of course is to continue the work that God has done in Jesus Christ who, from his birth at Bethlehem until his death on Calvary brought heaven to earth and showed us the way.