

Carol of the Epiphany by John Bell

© WGRG The Iona Community (Scotland)

I sought Him dressed in finest clothes, where money talks and status grows;
but power and wealth He never chose; it seems He lived in poverty.

I sought Him in the safest place, remote from crime or cheap disgrace;
but safety never knew His face: it seems He lived in jeopardy.

I sought Him where the spotlights glare, where crowds collect and critics stare;
but no one knew His presence there; it seems He lived in obscurity.

Then in the streets we heard the word that seemed, for all the world, absurd;
that those who could no gift afford were entertaining Christ the Lord.

And so, distinct from all we'd planned, among the poorest of the land
we did what few might understand: we touched God in a baby's hand.

“Mr Bell’s hymns are known for their use of common language and for a direct, unvarnished approach to the gospel. He approaches the Christmas and Epiphany narratives through the lens of justice, and his candid hymns often place the singer in the middle of the story as an actor. Such is the case here... Despite our plans to find the Christ Child among the rich, safe and famous, we find him ‘among the poorest of the land.’”

Dr C Michael Hawn umcdiscipleship.org June 21,2013

Can you see yourself - your perceptions, your beliefs - in the words of this hymn? Do you see yourself “in the middle of the story as an actor”? Describe what you see of yourself. How does that make you feel? Consider how you came to those perceptions, those beliefs.

I sought Him dressed in finest clothes, where money talks and status grows;
but power and wealth He never chose; it seems He lived in poverty.

Philippians 2:5-8 *“Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death - and the worst kind of death at that - a crucifixion.”* The Message¹

What does the circumstance of Christ's birth mean to you? How did you reach that understanding?

I sought Him in the safest place, remote from crime or cheap disgrace;
but safety never knew His face: it seems He lived in jeopardy.

1 Peter 2:21-25 "This is the kind of life you've been invited into, the kind of life Christ lived. He suffered everything that came his way so you would know that it could be done, and also know how to do it, step-by-step. He never did one thing wrong, Not once said anything amiss. They called him every name in the book and he said nothing back. He suffered in silence, content to let God set things right. He used his servant body to carry our sins to the Cross so we could be rid of sin, free to live the right way. His wounds became your healing. You were lost sheep with no idea who you were or where you were going. Now you're named and kept for good by the Shepherd of your souls."

The Message¹

How does the way Jesus lived His life influence the way you live your life? Are you happy with the degree of influence? If there are choices you've made that you regret, take some time to offer those regrets to God; ask for the grace to forgive yourself, and for the wisdom to avoid making the same choices in the future.

I sought Him where the spotlights glare, where crowds collect and critics stare;
but no one knew His presence there; it seems He lived in obscurity.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 "Notice among yourselves, dear brothers, that few of you who follow Christ have big names or power or wealth. Instead, God has deliberately chosen to use ideas the world considers foolish and of little worth in order to shame those people considered by the world as wise and great. He has chosen a plan despised by the world, counted as nothing at all, and used it to bring down to nothing those the world considers great, so that no one anywhere can ever brag in the presence of God."

The Message¹

Do you see Christ's absence "where the spotlights glare"? Why do you think that happens? What steps do you think can be taken to address?

Then in the streets we heard the word that seemed, for all the world, absurd;
that those who could no gift afford were entertaining Christ the Lord.

Luke 2:6-18 *"While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. ⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom. Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. ¹¹ Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. ¹² This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them."* The Common English Bible²

Shepherds were looked down on in the time of Jesus' birth. What impact did the fact that they were the first to hear of Jesus' birth and the first to be able to come and see Him have on those who first heard their story? How about the "Wise Men" that heard it later? Do you think because the first to hear of Jesus' birth were of a lower class influenced how that felt about the story? Would it change your feelings in you were in the place of the "Wise Men"? What about today? Does the source of a story of God's miraculous work in the world influence your opinion of the miracle?

And so, distinct from all we'd planned, among the poorest of the land
we did what few might understand: we touched God in a baby's hand.

“In what may be one of the most profound metaphors for the Incarnation, Mr Bell closes the
hymn with a most memorable and moving phrase: ‘We touched God in a baby's hand...’”

Dr C Michael Hawn umcdiscipleship.org June 21, 2013

How would it have felt to you to be in the place of the “Wise Men”, to be there and touch
the hand of baby Jesus? How does that translate into today's world for you – even
though Jesus is not here with us right now, in what ways have you been able to touch
God's presence? Think about those opportunities. How did they feel? How did they
make you feel? If you haven't thanked God for those brushes with eternity and the pure
love of God they represent, do that in this time leading up to the birth of Jesus the
Christ. Spend some time with those feelings and consider how you can share those with
others. How can you help someone else touch “God in a baby's hand”...

1 The Message Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson.

2 Common English Bible Copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible.