

Advent 4 SFX 2023 - Christmas Eve

By different calculations, the UK and Ireland's favourite Christmas song is the Pogues' *Fairytale of New York*. It's lead singer Shane MacGowan was laid to rest just a couple of weeks ago at a Catholic Funeral in Ireland.

Its opening words "*It was Christmas Eve, babe, in the drunk tank*" tell us that it is a song about Christmas, and it is about love. It is about youthful dreams crushed by alcohol and addiction, as a former couple bicker on Christmas Eve. And although it is a world away from our Christmas carols, I think it has a hold on people at Christmas because it is a ballad rooted in a gritty reality. It highlights the fact that a lot of people struggle at Christmas, and some argue and fight. It is a song that reminds us about those who have much, and those who have little. Those whose hopes have floundered. Most of us will be us lucky enough to spend the day with friends and family, by a warm fire and with a full stomach, while there are those who have lost their way on the dark streets of our world, lonely, homeless and hungry, others just scraping a living. In the midst of loss, "*you were handsome, you were pretty*" the song yearns for a better land, for better luck, and for better selves. "*So, Happy Christmas, I love you, baby, I can see a better time when all our dreams come true.*"

The song is both tragic and beautiful. As they shout and swear, and say they hate each other, the bells ring out for Christmas day and they realize how much they depend on each other. She shouts "*you took my dreams from me*" but he replies that he has kept them as his own. I "*can't make it on my own.*"

This song, I think, helps us make this transition from Advent to Christmas. Christ did not come into the world because we have it all together, because we have got it all sorted - rather because we are broken and lost. As we will sing tomorrow in a proper carol: "*In this world of sin... the dear Christ enters in.*"

And so the feet of an angel land lightly in Nazareth and he bows to a young girl who is one of us, but unlike us in that she has not been corrupted by the dirty devices of the world. She is one full of grace, whose hopes embody those of her people, the long yearning of the centuries for salvation, whose 'yes' remains the profoundest blessing for us today. "*Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you.*" What more would she or the world want to hear, that the Lord is with us?

And yet she was deeply disturbed, and her questions betray her fear of what this means. The story of the Annunciation is very familiar, but I only recently noticed that Mary's questioning turns into a 'yes' only when Mary knows that her kinswoman Elizabeth is with child too. In other words, when she realizes that she is not alone with her experience of an unexpected child, and that they would walk with this together and affirm each other.

As in the song none of us can make it on our own. Who here doesn't live with some disappointment. "*We had hoped*" were the crestfallen words of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. We live in a very imperfect world. It is easy to speak of the joys of Christmas, but there are many, who are not quite in the drunk tank, but who are conscious at this time of broken relationships and loss. It is because Christmas is a time of heightened joy, that for many in can be a heightened experience of sadness and loss.

Wouldn't it be good if this Christmas was not just about cheery smiles but a sense that we care about each other, that we hold onto each other's dreams. Then the bells ringing out for Christmas day would bring genuine joy to our world, and we would have learnt one of the most profound lessons that Jesus teaches – that we belong to each other, that we are brothers and sisters, and the only way to make this world a better place is to build those relationships one by one. *"I can't make it all alone"* as the song ends.

There is a short story by another Irishman, William Trevor, called *After Rain*. A young woman ends up in Italy shaking off a failed love affair. There is a storm, so she seeks shelter in a church and stands before a most beautiful painting of the Annunciation. As she leaves the Church the gloom suddenly and unexpectedly lifts from her soul. She had been crushed but fell the weight lifted from her. The rain stops and the air is fresher.

And then she makes a connection with the painting she has just seen in the church. The clear, fresh streets around her seem to be exactly that captured by the artist in the landscape that stands behind the Virgin and the Angel. Trevor says: *"She realizes: the Annunciation was painted after rain. Its distant landscape, glimpsed through arches, has the temporary look that she is seeing now. It was after rain that the angel came: those first cool moments were a chosen time."*

"It was after rain the angel came" is a phrase that has stayed with me. It is not a weather report. It speaks of the movement from Advent to Christmas, from a failed past to a fresh beginning. At the Annunciation, the burden of the years, the toil of the centuries, the heaviness of history is lifted, all summed up in one word – 'grace.'

It is what we await on Christmas day with the birth of the Christ-child. The desire of the eternal hills. *"For us and our salvation he came down from heaven."* He comes with healing in his wings to make us whole. Let us eagerly await his coming because, quite frankly, we need it.

The bells will soon be ringing out for Christmas day.