

Reflection at the Festival of Nine Lessons & Carols 2012

'And a little child shall lead them'

Amidst the high energy, the humour and the sheer spectacle of the Olympics opening ceremony this summer was a moment of sober reflection to remember the victims of the 7/7 bombings and our own mortality. The music was a hymn, 'Abide with me', sung by Emeli Sande, almost unaccompanied but with a subtle rhythm in the background. On the stage were 50 dancers led by Akram Khan. They danced with an almost disturbing energy as they depicted our human existence poised between the forces of life and death. A 9 year old boy appears and pursues Khan who is dancing himself into chaos. Instead of joining in the frenzy of this dance the boy surprises him – and us – by simply, gently but powerfully embracing him. It is the transforming moment that brings resolution, stillness and hope. It is what children can do for us and why they are so often a blessing, because they re-awaken within us our own childhood and also our own sense of being children of God, of the divine. This is the message of William Wordsworth, in his 'Intimations of Immortality'.

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.*

The vision we have lost can be reawakened when we return to the child. 'And a little child shall lead them'. Jesus once said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 18.3).

The abiding power of the Christmas story is that in it God becomes a child so that we too may become children again. 'But to as many as received him' writes St John, 'to them gave he power to become sons/children of God.' 'And a little child shall lead them.'

At the end of the dance it is the child who is raised up above the others and who reaches out his hand to the sun above in answer to the hymn's prayer 'shine through the gloom and point me to the skies'. It is the child who points the way. And once again this Christmas we gather in wonder at the mystery that it is this child who above all others has pointed us to the skies, shone through the gloom and opened the things of heaven to all who will receive him still.