

You may have noticed quite a number of events for singing carols this month - in fact, a dozen. You'd think, as I've done this every year for a very long time, I'd know some of them by heart by now. I don't. My wife often says, when I reach for the book, "You must know the words to this, you've sung it hundreds of times!" Well, sorry, I just can't remember them verbatim. I know what's in them. Usually. So I'm a little jealous when people have committed entire reams of hymns, carols, poetry, liturgy, etc, to memory.

However, I see my empty-headedness as a gift. Every year I hear, as if for the first time, passages of scripture rephrased, often with spine-chilling effect. "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel." "Come, thou long-expected Jesus..." "Christians, awake!" "Hark! The herald angels sing glory..." "Angels from the realms of glory..." "A great and mighty wonder... The Word becomes incarnate... Repeat the hymn again 'To God on high be glory, and peace on earth to men'." Get the picture? It is exciting to be focussed on the coming of God as one of us; to have breathed the same air, suckled by a human mother.

Ignoring the goo of "Away in a manger" (Jesus was born in a cave - not likely then to have had stars looking down where he lay, not likely to have awakened without crying for his mum's attention), with its treacly nursery tune (that's right, I don't much like it!) - where was I? - yes, ignoring that one, there are some marvellously tender and peace inducing carols, too. OK, so there are one or two medieval daft bits - it's certainly not likely to have been in the bleak mid-winter, frosty winds moaning and earth as hard as iron - but what jewels of imagination from poet and musician have been born into the world also because Jesus was born into the world. (Fact.)

Don't get me wrong, I'm not doing a bah-humbug thing here; quite the opposite: I get really wrapped up in it all. For me it's not nostalgia, it's something new. God is changing the world by His Presence. It's also new and exciting because, to be quite honest, I've usually forgotten about the words of Christmas from the year before...