

A REFLECTION FOR ADVENT BY CHURCH OF SCOTLAND MINISTER, PETER MILLAR

MY CHRISTMAS POEM FOR 2021: Many years ago when our home was in South India I began to send out a Christmas poem each year. From the start, the poem went to people of different faiths and to many who were exploring the human journey in general. Back then I tried in the various poems to reflect the core hope within the birth of Jesus. Yet that amazing Truth was always linked in my own understanding to many, often harsh realities we were encountering each day in India – both in the great city of Madras (now Chennai) and in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu. The poems continued on our return to Scotland, and later on when my wife Dorothy and I visited many other parts of the world in our shared ministry - not least in Australia when we were part of the ecumenical and visionary Wellspring Community. The poems were sent out during our years working with the Iona Community on Iona, and after Dorothy's very sudden death early in 2001 I believed it was important to continue with the poem at Christmas. The poems have linked me to many great and I would say, visionary people, near my home and far from it.

As some of you may know, in January of 2016 I was diagnosed with bone marrow cancer – an incurable but treatable cancer. I have been blessed to have lived six years with this companion in my body, but 2021 has been the toughest year so far – not least because of my encounter with serious Covid 19. When I was thinking about this year's poem I was very conscious of a theme I have written about over the last two years in my "A Candle in the Window" reflections. That theme relates at various levels to the global turbulence which has accompanied the pandemic. Many of the old markers have disappeared for ever, and all our lives have been challenged by global events. We have all been disturbed in our minds and hearts one way or another, and today many around the world find it difficult to live with hope deep within.

In previous years I have been asked to send out the poem at the beginning of Advent in order that there is time to share it around. I find it humbling that my words go to different places in our connected world, and I hope that many people who do not find themselves within any traditional faith framework will find the poem helpful. Perhaps I have written the poem for myself as I face my own health problems, but I have tried to place the thoughts and words within a global context. We share so much together on this small planet which needs heaps of hope, justice and of compassion everywhere. (The poem is overleaf/below)

The Candle in the Heart

We all experience it –

may be for days, for months,

that inner feeling that all is tumbling.

That the precious candle in the heart is not lit:

its glow gone, and the guiding

flame no longer there.

Within us, these defiant siblings -

fear and confusion - play havoc with the mind.

Anchorless and scared, are we drifting or drowning

as we witness one global sorrow after another?

Yet from time to time something stirs the heart,

the longing for Light;

to know again that we share a common heart-beat;

to accept that our fears may be shot through with hope;

that this precious planet actually teems

with life, compassion and beauty.

And then in our drifting we see the candle is not out, but lit,

inviting us back to an ever-present Truth;

*a Truth that understands drowning, and brings the wounded
healing.*

Stumbling we may be, but our shaky hands reach for that candle

and once more feel its energies of life - as Love fills our soul.

(Peter Millar, Edinburgh, December 2021)