



Chichester Cathedral | Reflection 1



Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme (BWV 645), played by Timothy Ravalde of Chichester Cathedral and **Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Census at Bethlehem* (1566)** in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Belgium.



In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

(The Gospel according to St Luke 2.1-6, Revised Standard Version)

In 1598, the Lutheran pastor and poet Philipp Nicolai was ministering to the people of Unna in Westphalia. He had recently arrived there from Wittenberg, where he had completed his theological studies but now, with the city engulfed by plague, Nicolai wrote the hymn *Wachet auf*. It's now more famously known to us through Bach's cantata (BWV 140) and the chorale, transcribed later by Bach for the organ which we hear now. It is a meditation on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins:

*Wake up, the voice calls us
of the watchmen high up on the battlements,
wake up, you city of Jerusalem!
This hour is called midnight;
they call us with a clear voice:
where are you, wise virgins?
Get up, the bridegroom comes;
Stand up, take your lamps! Hallelujah!
Alleluia!
Make yourselves ready
for the wedding, you must go to meet him!*

And then the verse, upon which this organ piece is based - *Zion hört die Wächter singen* – (*Zion hears the watchmen sing, her heart leaps for joy, she awakes and gets up in haste*). The melody is for many the sound that Advent has begun. The parable urges us to be awake, to be alert, ready to greet the coming of our Lord, who brings salvation for Jerusalem, for Israel, for the world.

In a city ridden with plague, Nicolai's hymn inviting the citizens to prepare for the joyful welcome of their Saviour must have stood in stark contrast with a city in which doors were firmly shut against the spread of plague.



How different then from the scene we see before us in perhaps the most famous of Pieter Brueghel the Elder's winter scenes, which is filled with bustle, activity and crowds. You can spend ages wondering about the thoughts each character – from the man leaning out the window of the tavern, to the children playing with their spinning-tops on the ice, the frazzled civil official trying to register all these outsiders who have bustled into the town for the census, to the heavily pregnant woman on a donkey being slowly navigated through the chaos by a man whose face we do not see but who wields a carpenter's saw.

Like a Franciscan nativity scene, Brueghel's backdrop invited his first viewers to consider afresh the story of the Holy Family's coming in the context of their own lives. This was a period in which northern Europe had been feeling the particularly harsh effects of the so-called 'Little Ice Age': extreme cold and terrible harvests, coupled with punitive taxation by the Habsburg authorities in Holland (their coat of arms hangs above the inn); like the pig being slaughtered in the foreground, so also with Holland under the rule of Philip II.

Closer inspection reveals that amid the individual stories there are scenes of anxiety and stress. A child's being dragged away, the discomfort of the group seeking to register, and the crumbling buildings in the background giving voice to a sense that the old order is passing away. And into this hustle and bustle come the Holy Family, the face of Mary remarkably serene amid the chaos of the census and the excitement and expectation of a Dutch Christmas Eve.

For Brueghel, for Nicolai, both living through times of upheaval, political unrest, hunger and plague, there is this *cantus firmus* – this firm voice, as we hear in the organ - of God's presence breaking in, stealthily, quietly: a simple family, with simple intent, looking for somewhere safe to stay, to give birth, to tend and nurture a newborn, the one promised from of old.

God invites us in this music and painting, and in the text of Luke 2 itself, to step out of the imperial high drama of Caesar Augustus, away from a plague-ridden town and social unrest, and fix our eyes on that which, at first sight, seems so simple, so ordinary, so easily ignored; two open-hearted people undertaking the call of God with ready hearts - no doubt uncertain, no doubt scared, but fixated on the promise of the Bridegroom who does not delay, who comes soon, who urges us to be ready and our hearts be fixed where true joys and peace are to be found.

In the stress of our own lives this year, the invitation is now less salient for us: to turn aside from the bustle, the pandemic, the political stress, and our frustrations with the authorities, each other, and so on, and to wake up - to hear the cry of the watchman, high up on the battlements, announcing that the bridegroom *is* coming.



Perhaps at home you can find some time to set aside and look afresh at this picture, and, for a period, imagine your own life as a Brueghel landscape. What is the noise and activity that defines life at the moment?

Just as individual stories abound in this painting, what occupies your landscape?

Just as in this painting, it could be good, it could be rather negative – it might be activity, it might be what occupies your thoughts more than you'd like at the moment. What's the business of your Brueghel painting?

And then once you've done that, look again at Mary and Joseph and ask yourself: where do I see Christ within my landscape? As in this painting, it could be remarkably simple – a particular friendship, a place even. You might find it helpful to even review the year, as best you can – and ask the Holy Spirit to show you where Jesus has been present. Just note it down and give thanks. But the aim is simple: if we you can discern where Christ has been present in our past, your eyes will be sharpened to see him in the future; to see, amid the chaos, love quietly burning in your midst.

O Lord our God,
make us watchful and keep us faithful
as we await the coming of your Son our Lord;
that, when he shall appear,
he may not find us sleeping in sin
but active in his service
and joyful in his praise;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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