

Guide our feet in the way of peace being third painting of three on Luke 1:77-78 Advent 2022

Dear all, this is the third of three paintings in the light series, responding, in the Spirit, to the verses at the end of Zechariah's magnificent prophecy about his son John and the one who would come after John, Jesus Christ, messiah and saviour. For me they are intriguing, enigmatically different from one another, not at all the coherent trilogy I envisaged when I first started thinking about this a few months ago.

The verses in Luke 1:78-79 read "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (NRSV)

As an aside, I use the NRSV Bible partly because Anglican Churches around here tend to use it and partly because it represents a serious attempt to translate the ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek of the bible as it was originally written. It is a translation rather than a paraphrase which means that when I am not sure that I understand a passage, if I look back at the Greek New testament, for example, I can usually see how the translators have tried to represent the meaning of the Greek into modern English, as task made difficult because ancient Greek is structurally and functionally a very different language from modern English and ancient Hebrew even more so. Occasionally the NRSV is a bit clunky especially when reading aloud, and you do have to concentrate, and I don't know about anyone else, but I have to prepare the readings in advance.

The first painting was in Advent, and was "The Dawn from on High", triggered off by Kerry Devine on the BBC Folk Show on Sunday 11th December, talking about the light and the frost and the trees. It was a beautiful explosion of light in a cool blue winter landscape and immensely pleasurable to wake up and see what the computer had done with my photomontage and configuration. I described it this morning as like leaving it running behind a curtain and lifting the corner to peep underneath to see what had happened. And there it was, an unexpectedly beautiful gem. I was utterly delighted with it.

The second painting was, for me but not for God, an unexpected foray into painting the aurora borealis, thinking about the importance of light to the Inuit Christian people my father worked with, during the long dark months of winter, when the sun doesn't rise at all. It was a delight for me too because I have been trying to paint the aurora for months, but succeeded only when God was ready for success. So, that was 'To Give Light to Those Who Live In Darkness' preferring the word 'live' used in the NIV to the word 'sit' used by the translators of the NRSV.

I have been pondering the final words of the prophecy in the context of world events of the last year and hopes and prayers for the next year. As I have been pondering, so I have realised the importance of handing over to God the situations which place so many people of this world into conflict not of their own making, not just in Ukraine, but in many other places, some frequently heard about in the news Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan for example, others ignored for years at a time like the ongoing conflicts in Myanmar, Ethiopia, Nigeria and many of the countries around the Congo, as well as Mexico and Columbia. The armed gangs running countries like Venezuela and Haiti, crime capitals of the world.

A conversation earlier in the week made me think of Christ not as new-born baby, but as Christ the King, through whom and for whom everything was created. Christ weeping over Jerusalem and weeping now, as we frantically try and work out what to pray for. I thank God for those words of comfort in Romans 8, when Paul, realising that we were all going to face the impossible some of the time, wrote this 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we

ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.'

This is a place where I like the fluidity of some of the bibles designed to be read aloud. Here I also like 'wordless groans' as a translation of the Greek, and so I prefer the NIV translation "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."

I thank God that whatever the translators might say, the main thing is that when I have no idea where to start praying, the Holy Spirit groans wordless intercessions, sighs too deep to fathom. How absolutely wonderfully reassuring!

The saints, just to be clear, means all of us, not just the clever fancy ones, but every single follower of Jesus Christ, no matter how inadequate they might feel, they are just as much a saint as any other Christian. If you struggle to be sure of that, just remember that Mother Teresa, Archbishop Tutu and Martin Luther King were all wracked with doubt and imposter syndrome and struggled just as much as you, so if you consider them to be saints, that means you are a saint as well.

Finally, a wonderful, funny discussion about my childish drawings of stars in the 'pale blue dot' painting, a conversation just this morning, made me think about the glorious diversity of stars.

I imagined looking into our galaxy from the outside, what our world would look like if you had never seen it before. You would see much beauty and love, of course. You would see much pain and many people living in fear and terror. It seems to me appropriate to think of those words of Zechariah as we enter a new year and to pray them perhaps, as a prayer.

"Heavenly Father, your dawn from on high, Jesus Christ, has broken, is breaking and will break upon us. We pray now for light for those who live in darkness; fear and in the shadow of death. We pray now for your light, for Jesus Christ, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Amen"

And so I leave you with the third of three paintings. Each set in the context of Zechariah's prophecy, Advent and the coming of Jesus, but each otherwise very different. This one "Guide our feet in the way of peace." is a view looking in. If we were looking at our own Milky Way galaxy from the Andromeda Galaxy. M31, the nearest large galaxy to our own, the view would be very much like this. And that is because this is, in fact, a painting of that Galaxy, from here, from someone's back garden in fact!.

As I was thinking about that idea of a stranger arriving and looking in, I came across this beautiful image on Flickr, posted by a backyard astronomer who had spent two years pointing the telescope at M31 and taking long exposures, and slowly adding them together. It is one of the most beautiful and accomplished pieces of backyard astronomy I have ever seen, and I have seen quite a lot. So I cropped a careful selection to make a harmonious composition and painted this painting. And I hope that we will all use Zechariah's beautiful words in prayer for peace in 2023 and into the future. Love, Grace and Peace from Rick