

A Christmas Day Sermon 2013
Rt. Revd. David Conner

David John Conner KCVO has been Dean of Windsor since 1998 and former Bishop to the Forces (2001-2009). He also holds the post of Registrar of the Order of the Garter and is a domestic chaplain to Queen Elizabeth II. Coming across John Meade Falkner's Poem – *Christmas Day: The Family Sitting* – in *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, he decided to use it for his Christmas Day sermon '*simply because it seemed to catch that mix of nostalgia, regret, sadness and longing that I believe most adults, past a certain age, recognise – maybe especially at Christmas*'.



St. George's Chapel, Windsor

Come to me, all you that are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Those well-known words come from St Matthew's Gospel and were in my mind as I wrote this sermon. *Come to me, all you that are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

In the early years of the twentieth century, the writer John Meade Falkner, so it seems, was in a church on Christmas morning reflecting on his life. His thoughts developed into the poem *Christmas Day – The Family Sitting*. He remembers that, as a child, he had sat in that same church and heard the story of how Joseph and Mary journeyed to Judea in order that Joseph might be registered in the census.

In the days of Caesar Augustus
There went forth this decree:
Si quis rectus et Justus
Liveth in Galilee,
Let him go up to Jerusalem
And pay his scot to me.

The poet continues in pensive mood:

There passed one after the other
Christmases fifty-three,
Since I sat here with my mother
And heard the great decree:
How they went up to Jerusalem
Out of Galilee.

He remembers not only his mother but all the members of his family, and writes:

They have passed one after the other
Father and mother died,
Brother and sister and brother
Taken and sanctified.
I am left alone in the sitting,
With none to sit beside.

And as he remains in solitary mood in the church on Christmas morning, he looks around him and further reflects:

The pillars are twisted with holly,
And the font is wreathed with yew,
Christ forgive me for folly,
Youth's lapses – not a few,
For the hardness of my middle life,
For age's fretful view.

As John Meade Falkner thinks of how much of his life he regrets, he perhaps glimpses something of his lost innocence in the children who fill the church on this Christmas morning.

The bells ring out in the steeple
The gladness of erstwhile,
And the children of other people
Are walking up the aisle;
They brush my elbow in passing,
Some turn to give me a smile.

Our writer, deep in thought, concludes his poem with the words:

My Lord, where I have offended
Do Thou forgive it me.
That so, when all being ended,
I hear Thy last decree.
I may go up to Jerusalem
Out of Galilee.

*

For many of us, as it seems to have been for John Meade Falkner, Christmas is a bitter-sweet time. There are fond memories of Christmases past, and of course much happiness to be derived from witnessing the delight of children and experiencing the kindness of friends. But there is also a sense of the passing of time (another year gone) and the question of how that time has been used; what we have made of our lives.

Christ forgive me for folly,
Youth's lapses – not a few,
For the hardness of my middle life,
For age's fretful view.

Though, in the course of our daily lives, we disguise the fact from those around us, and perhaps conceal it even from ourselves, for many of us there is, buried somewhere deep inside, some lingering regret; some sense of all we might have been; some awareness of time wasted; some wishing that things might have been different. And it can often be at Christmas time that this sadness surfaces.

It is bearing such a secret burden that many of us come to church on Christmas Day. And as we hear the old familiar story and sing the old familiar carols, we find a kind of solace; strange comfort. It is like the

drawing of a blanket over us on a wintry morning as we shelter from the cold.

But sometimes something else seems to be at work; something that awakens us and stirs us; something that invigorates. It simply dawns upon us that we celebrate the birth of the babe of Bethlehem because that child grew to be the man whose life was to be so spent in serving others that those around him came to see him as God's word of love declared to humankind; God's inner nature being revealed through human flesh. They came to see that God was 'present' in him; here amongst us. Through his compassion, healing and forgiving, they saw God reaching out to us in mercy. Through his suffering they saw the lengths that God will go to in order to embrace us. Through his resurrection, they were given confidence that God's love could not be overcome. Through his ascension into heaven they caught sight of the destiny God has in mind for us.

My Lord, where I have offended
Do thou forgive it me.
That so, when all being ended,
I hear Thy last decree,
I may go up to Jerusalem,
Out of Galilee.

Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate today, is God's word of consolation uttered to all who, like John Meade Falkner, are burdened with regret; the reassurance that God's love will never let us go.

Of course that word is understood through what might be called 'the heart's intelligence'. It is truth first grasped by intuition and imagination. But, once heard with the inward ear of faith, it has the power to transform lives; such a powerful operation as could never be sustained by mere fantasy; simply never could endure as it has endured, down through the ages.

God's reassuring word of love declared to us in Jesus Christ relieves us of the burden of regret, rekindles hope, engenders gratitude, and draws out of us, as if it were just natural, prayer and praise.

Above all, this reassuring word of love is for us a source of peace and joy. No wonder then that, when the writers of the Gospels wanted to convey the significance of the birth of this man Jesus, they wrote of the poor shepherds running in gleeful anticipation to the stable, of wise men falling to their knees in adoration, and of angels singing in the heavens. What good news has been brought to us! What good news we have, in word and deed, to share with others!

Through all the confusion, sadness and regret of our complicated lives, we have heard through Jesus Christ those amazing and consoling words of love: *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*



David Conner with Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip



St George's Chapel, Windsor