

Miracle at Christmas

Peter Miles couldn't see the singer from where he was sitting, but the soprano voice was as pure as that of an angel:

*There were shepherds abiding in the fields
Keeping watch over their flocks by night*

The solo from The Messiah carried Peter right back to St Mark's. He had sung those words as a boy in the choir - an angelic-looking lad who tried so hard to live up to that image. Today, as he sat in his pew at St Winifred's, pulling at his collar to relieve the pressure of the unfamiliar tie, he was trying to resist the onset of nostalgia. He turned his attention to the words of Handel's aria:

*And suddenly the angel of the Lord was about them
And they were sore afraid.*

Then, a couple of lines later:

*And suddenly there was with the angel
A multitude of the Heavenly Host.....*

Shepherds abiding in the fields. Surely, he thought, there wouldn't have been fields in Palestine, not in the modern sense anyhow. In England the enclosure of pasture land had not occurred until the sixteenth century. He pictured the poor shepherds, expecting the day to be much like any other, when suddenly a character purporting to be an angel swoops among them, backed up by a gang calling themselves 'The Heavenly Host'. No wonder they were sore afraid.

Pack it in, Peter told himself, you didn't come here to mock the scriptures. He was at St Winifred's on Christmas morning in a spirit of penance. Beth had been a believer and he usually joined her at the Christmas service. But on her last Christmas he had been at home nursing a hangover while she went alone. It had meant so much to her but so little to him. He had let her down yet again. She always gave in to his charm, allowing him the freedom to be irresponsible.

Now he sat near the back of the crowded church, afraid of being overwhelmed by remorse. He diverted his mind again, reflecting on the name of the church. Who was this St Winifred anyway? To him the name recalled a young woman named Winifred D'Costa. She had been from Goa, on the coast of India.

Peter's employers, a commercial bank, had sent him as a young man to Bahrain, where he was responsible for the department handling Letters of Credit. It was a small department, just six locally employed Arab and Indian staff plus himself, all men except for Winifred. The room was cramped, with small desks positioned close to each other and a slightly larger one for himself at the back. The filing cabinet was squeezed between his desk and the wall and it was there that Winifred spent much of her day, standing beside him, filing documents with unflinching efficiency.

He remembered her modestly-dressed figure and her demure character. She had radiated simple virtue. He believed it was Winifred who set the example for that disparate group of people who worked together in such harmony. They all treated her with respect (and they probably adored her). Peter had been their superior in rank, but had never felt himself the equal of those good people. They had brought out the best in

him, a best that he had in time allowed to slip away. He wondered - was this unknown Winifred really more saintly than Winifred D'Costa?

Poor Beth had been claimed by her all-merciful God just four months short of the retirement that she had longed for and deserved. This Christmas, nearly two years after her death, Peter had come to expiate his guilt, resolved to try to live as she would have wished him to. Perhaps, he thought, with little conviction, on this day the Angel of the Lord might descend once more and help him to be reborn as the man he had once tried to be.

He joined in the singing of the familiar carols; he still possessed the voice that had won him his place in the choir at St Mark's. But music can be dangerous, possessing the power to penetrate defences and expose buried feelings. Here in this ancient church it was difficult for an ex-choirboy not to be affected.

Now they were singing 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing' and suddenly the soprano voices of the choir soared to the rafters as they gave full throat to the descant to the last verse:

*Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth*

The descant had always thrilled him and now he was overwhelmed. He sat down with the rest of the congregation and was helpless to control his tears. The minister asked the worshippers to greet each other and they began to shake hands with their neighbours, exchanging the words 'peace be with you'. Peter remained in his seat, oblivious to the activity around him. Then, as if in a dream, he felt a gentle hand on his arm and a quiet voice saying, "Peace be with you, Mr Miles".

The service was at an end and Peter sat still, slowly reconnecting with his surroundings. He looked at the stained-glass window above the altar and brought it into focus. Christ healing the sick - that seemed to be the theme. Then he remembered the voice that had come to his dazed mind. Had he imagined it? Had an angel seen his despair and come to comfort him? He looked up, preparing to rise and join the throng that was making its way towards the door. Then, across the aisle he saw the face that matched the voice he had heard. He looked down. He was still in the realm of unreality; his mind had never played such tricks on him before.

"I've given you quite a shock, haven't I? You remember me, don't you?" She was standing over him, and now she sat down. "I'm so sorry about your wife. My mother tells me she knew her slightly - it seems they used to talk sometimes here at the church. I had no idea you lived here until I saw you this morning." She saw his look of confusion. "Are you alright Mr Miles?"

Peter was shaking his head in disbelief. "Winifred - here at St Winifred's. It can't be real." He searched her face and looked into the dark, kind eyes that he remembered.

"My mother said to ask if you'll come and have a sherry and a mince pie with us. It's no distance." She indicated her elderly mother, sitting in the pew opposite.

Peter got to his feet. Was it possible that Winifred had first emerged as a memory and then materialised beside him? She had not changed substantially, as some do with the passage of years. She kept her hair in the same simple style, though now it was grey. He thought with relief that this was the first day in more than a year that he had gone out looking clean and respectable.

They walked slowly through the graveyard to the gate and she told her story. “Soon after you left I went back to Goa to marry. He had been chosen by my family. Then we emigrated – to this area. Four years ago he died and my mother came to join me. She was also a widow.”

They ushered Peter into the front room of their immaculate terraced house. Her mother poured them first one and then a second sherry and Winifred became voluble, reminiscing about the Credits Department in Bahrain.

“You were our chief topic of discussion, whenever you weren’t in the room. I used to make them laugh with my impression of how you looked after a party the night before, holding your head and signing whatever we put in front of you. I think you went to a lot of parties. We all liked you, though; it was a good place to work.” She turned to her mother, and with a gleam in her eye that Peter had never seen before, said: “I had to pretend I didn’t notice the way this young man – he was very good looking then – used to sneak a look at me when I was standing at the filing cabinet, that is at the bit of me that was level with his eyes.”

“Really, Winifred,” said her mother, “What are you saying? And anyway he is still a good looking man.”

Peter slowly shook his head and smiled. There was no sense of disillusion; rather he felt a warm glow as he learned what a false image he had held of that office. He had tried to live up to the respect he was shown by the pure and virtuous Winifred, but it turned out that she had always seen through him. And anyway, she had not been quite as pure in thought as he had imagined. Now, as she became less of a saint he became less of a sinner. Perhaps it required a fallible angel to perform the Christmas miracle and release him from his remorse and the impossible wish to recover a virtue that he had never possessed.