

I want to start with that short poem written in 1908 by Minnie Louise Haskin. It was a favourite of Queen Elizabeth the late Queen Mother, who showed it to her husband King George VI. He included it in his famous Christmas message broadcast in 1939 at the beginning of the Second World War. After the King's death the Queen Mother had it engraved on bronze plaques in the entrance to the King George VI Memorial Chapel, Windsor, where both are now interred. It was also read at the funeral service of the Queen Mother.

**I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'
And he replied, 'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!'
So I went forth and finding the Hand of God
Trode gladly into the night
He led me towards the hills
And the breaking of day in the lone east.
So heart be still!
What need our human life to know
If God hath comprehension?
In all the dizzy strife of things
Both high and low,
God hideth his intention."**

The New Year which King George welcomed in his broadcast was 1940: the year which saw the fall of France, the evacuation of the British army from Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and the start of the Blitz. Seventy years on, we look with some foreboding into the New Year and I think it wouldn't do any harm to take the old King's advice and *Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God*. And for each of us to do this deliberately first thing every morning in our private prayers.

The practitioners in the newspapers and on television have been giving us the benefit of their soothsaying in the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve. Most of them see continuing recession and financial crisis. Many also see the heightened danger from terrorism and even a new war generated perhaps by a resurgent Al Qaida in Yemen and Somalia and the unresolved issue of Iran's development of nuclear weapons.

When Jesus walked the earth, the times were troubled too. Israel was a province of the Roman Empire and was subject to a terrorist insurgency. There were the rebels known as the Zealots and one of Jesus's disciples, Simon, was one of these according to the gospels. There were also the Sicari, or dagger men; and some Bible historians say Judas Iscariot may have been one of them. The rebellion intensified until eventually in AD 70 the Romans ran out of patience, besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The historian Josephus tells us that over a million Jews were killed in this assault.

Jesus had predicted the fall of Jerusalem. Standing with his disciples outside the temple, about forty years before the event, he said, *See ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.*

The disciples thought that events so catastrophic as these would usher in the apocalypse, the end of the world. They asked Jesus when the end of the present order would come. He replied, *Ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, famines and pestilences and earthquakes in divers places.* This was an ironical answer. For of course in the whole history of the world there are always wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines and pestilences. Our Lord's irony is highly significant.

Let me try to explore this with reference to our own times: now, the start of 2010. What looms largest in most people's lives is not the terrorist threat, nor is it Iran and its possible nuclear bombs, nor a pestilence maybe in the form of mutated bird flu virus, nor even the secularised phoney apocalypse known as global warming. As Jesus said, the world always lives with those sorts of catastrophes as the backdrop to daily life. But the true source of our concerns, our besetting anxieties, is not in these things at all.

What really impinge upon us are the minute and even banal torments of our everyday lives. The central heating boiler bursts in the middle of the cold snap and you can't get a plumber for love nor money. Or you have a financial transaction or a contractual affair which is not disastrous but it goes on for ages, then it goes slightly wrong and so you have to involve officialdom. You enquire and you are told what papers you have to find. Of course, you spend hours but you can't find them all. You find as many as you can and take them to the appropriate office where you queue. Finally you sit down in a chair to consult the official who takes your bundle of papers and eyes you with mute contempt. Then he asks, *Is your P69 a double-digit warranty?*

Pathetically, you answer, *I don't know.*

Without a word, he gets up, takes your papers and leaves the room for ten minutes. The queue behind you gets restive. Eventually, the official comes back and says, *This office doesn't deal with your sort of case any longer.*

So you ask, *Where should I go then? Is it far?*

Oh no, he says *It's just across the road.* Your wilting spirits are raised by this news and you pick up your briefcase and coat and prepare to go over the road. But the official smiles and says, *It's no use going over there now – they close at four o'clock on Wednesdays.*

What makes Franz Kafka such a great writer is that he describes this daily world of small nightmares exactly: the world of tiny frustrations which succeed one another thick and fast so that it can seem that our whole lives are consumed by them. And into this mild paranoia you have to throw in all the uncertainties. We try to see our lives as stable and permanent *with such permanence as time has*, but really it is not so. We live in a world of time and flux. Anything might happen to disturb our manufactured ease, and it usually does. People lose their jobs. Relationships change, sometimes bitterly,

agonisingly. We fall sick. Perhaps not even something life-threatening, but a gnawing, irritating, chronic condition of body or soul which is enough to undermine us. As Hamlet says,

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me—no, nor woman neither...

This is the sensation which the Psalmist describes as *The pestilence that walketh in darkness and the sickness that destroyeth in the noonday*. Frustration, anxiety, disappointment, depression, the gradual, slow loss of cheerfulness, confidence and hope. These things – not Al Qaida and the Mullahs' bombs are the things which disturb our peace.

And this is where we are asked to *Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God*. In The Sermon on the Mount Jesus described our fretful disposition and told us precisely the one way we can be freed from it:

Take no thought, saying What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? Or Wherewithal shall we be clothed? Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

It's not the threat of world war or bubonic plague which destroys our peace. Our amiability is strangled by minute particulars. It's not the weapon of mass destruction which oppresses our thoughts, but the problem of what to get for the cat's tea when the fishmonger is shut – that and a thousand other small distractions like it. *We are distracted from distraction by distraction.*

Try to let it go. *Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?*

At the beginning of this New Year,

**'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!'
So I went forth and finding the Hand of God
Trode gladly into the night
He led me towards the hills
And the breaking of day in the lone east.
So heart be still!
What need our human life to know
If God hath comprehension?
In all the dizzy strife of things
Both high and low,
God hideth his intention.'**

