

A dark, bleak time. A wilderness the way;
cold and unrelenting was the night.
Come with tender mercy, Christ, we pray.

Imagine you're far from home – a home you've left behind because you must. You're travelling and it's hard. All you see during the day are strange faces in strange towns, who view you with suspicion. There's no one to trust, no one who cares.

The world feels a dark, bleak place. You're fearful and anxious. The child inside you will be born soon, and you have no idea where.

Such thoughts were in my mind as I wrote the poem Advent, which you'll find on the inside back cover. Do find the words to follow.

I wanted to capture the experience of Mary as she travelled with Joseph to be registered. A familiar story, long ago – but relevant today. Mary stands for so many now, and through the ages. People on the move, far from the security they crave.

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Except, of course, there was no Christ, as yet, to pray to. Mary had little idea of what her child would mean to the world. As the story goes, she had heard from an angel that she was favoured of God. She had some inkling that the child would be different, special – but how could she know his significance? Thoughts far from her mind, as now, weary to her core, she longed for warmth, for rest. She was at the limit of her endurance.

It seemed all heaven and earth had passed away.
No love. No warmth. No rest. No friendly sight.
A dark, bleak time. A wilderness the way.

Another step, and then another. Along that dark, interminable road.

The steady human stream of the highway had died down, now that night had come. 'but more dangerous', thought Joseph. Her pregnancy made them vulnerable. But paradoxically safe. For they looked poor. A couple with nothing to give. Not worth the effort.

The road was rough, but as the moon grew bright, the ruts threw shadows. She stumbled less. She took a moment to glance up. The familiar round face had silver rings around. She gained courage.

For you with child, awaiting the dawn of day
The gentle knowing moon gave holy light.
Come with tender mercy, Christ, we pray.

The lights of a town! She sighed. And paused again. May this be the place. Please, dear God. As they drew near, it was busy. 'Too busy', muttered Joseph. There was nightlife; people milling around on the streets; the odd market stall still trading – food, trinkets for the travellers.

They tried one place. No luck. Another. And another. And then someone took pity on her. "There's a stable out the back. Rough. The animals'll keep you warm." He gave them a candle, and Joseph pulled the blanket out across the straw.

A single flame with steady, circling ray
Brought comfort on that terrifying night.
A dark, bleak time. A wilderness the way.

It wasn't a long labour. All that walking had helped. Shaken him down, firmly into her pelvis. Joseph – good, kind, solid Joseph – calmly asked the wife to help, and stayed through it all.

The pain came and went in waves. Her young body did what it had to do.

And there he was. Exquisite. Healthy. Content.

As she fed him, the world stood still. The animals stopped their chewing. The dog stood to attention by the door. It seemed as though all creation had gathered itself in one momentous silent holding of breath – and then, like the great outrush of tension, the world came alive.

With raucous, vibrant, joyous life.

Mary knew she had given birth to hope. Hope that this tired, dark world yearned to receive. Hope born with this new life. Hope born of the knowledge of the love of God.

A song sang out, across the starlit way.
The angels' shout announced the daystar bright.
Come with tender mercy, Christ, we pray.

As dawn glowed gold across the Eastern sky, the door pushed open to show three hesitant, eager faces. Shepherds who had hurried from the hills. They told of a great light across the sky; of angels singing a song that stopped their hearts with joy. They knew something extraordinary had happened. A new bright light had dawned. A light and life such as the world had never seen.

And you, Christchild, guide our feet this day;
To those who dwell in darkness, give your light.
Through dark, bleak times - through wilderness - the way,
Come with tender mercy, Christ, we pray.

And we, this holy night, who have gathered to this crib, are bathed in that same light. We receive the gift of hope, born of the love of God. This is a gift we are asked to share, for many dwell in darkness today. In fear. Caught in despair and helplessness. Heavy laden with fatigue.

God's gift of hope is ours, ours to give and share. Received this night as blessing, it's ours to take out into the future, to bring to the dark places of the world. What more could you do, in 2017, to make the world a more hopeful place? To tell and show the life and love, the Christchild born in us this night?

A hopeful, loving person brings life to others. May your feet and mine be guided with the light of hope.

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