



## *Leaving Bethlehem*

*Dear Friends,*

A few weeks ago my attention was arrested by a Christmas card entitled 'Leaving Bethlehem'. It was a drawing of the Holy Family fleeing by night, going out through the gates of the town, on their way as refugees to Egypt. The nativity narratives are nearly all about coming to Bethlehem and that, naturally, is what we tend to focus on. But as I thought about it I came to see that the leaving, for all sorts of reasons, was as important as the coming. Mary and Joseph had to leave the place of assurance and revelation for the unknown road, the always lurking danger, the foreign country. This road they had to take would lead them back to Nazareth and, for Jesus, from Nazareth to Calvary, from manger to cross. In the midst of so much darkness and unknowing, they knew themselves caught up in the greatest moment of destiny the world has ever known – and they trusted the road ahead to God. The shepherds, too, had to leave; to go back to the only world they knew of tending sheep, to the same drudgery and ignorance and being treated as of no account. But they went back, seeing things differently. Something had forever changed for them, and when days were hard they could remember and rejoice that it was to them the angels sang their song of promises fulfilled and hope forever present. The wise men, patient seekers after truth, came also to Bethlehem, side-tracked by the tyranny of hatred in the corridors of power, but guided by the star. Overwhelmed by being in the presence of Love incarnate, the One destined to point all people towards home-coming, they knelt before him with their gifts. And then they, too, had to leave, to go back to where they started. Because of the threats from Herod and because of the Light revealed to them, they travelled home by a different route. For them also, life would never be the same.

Very soon we will be celebrating Christmas. We, too, will come to Bethlehem. And if we are awake, we too will be aware of being in the presence of the One who dwells among us. Bethlehem means 'House of Bread'. It is here we are nourished, comforted, inspired and affirmed. The temptation will be to remain with the feeling that such an experience gives us. It's hard to leave, to journey into a cold and bleak 2017. We cannot stay; we also have to go back – back to our duties and responsibilities, back to the world where there is so much drudgery and darkness and despair. But if our journey through Advent and our encounter has been real, we go back by another road. We go back as light bearers, as hope givers. We know something that perhaps we have not known before. We have touched a reality that is greater than all that would drag us down. We recognise that we have not really left Bethlehem but that we carry this 'House of Bread' within us in the person of Jesus the Christ, by whom we are nurtured and sustained. In that assurance I can wish you all a Happy Christmas and a Blessed New Year! *Ruth*

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