

# **Reflection on 21 December 2025**

## **by Maria Henriksson-Bell,**

### **Lay Leader of Worship**

#### **No man is an island**

It is December the 21st - in this hemisphere the darkest day of the year - so this will be a bit dark, but hang in there. May God bless what is said and what is heard.

*No man is an island,  
Entire of itself;  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.*

*If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less,  
As well as if a promontory were:  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were.*

*Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind.  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.*

This poem by 17th-Century cleric and poet John Donne has sat with me at various points in life. It came to mind superficially the other week as my immediate family was in California and I was home alone experiencing something which is mercifully rare for me. Loneliness.

I did two things: 1. I reached out to a few people and organised to meet and we met and had a lovely time, and 2. I prayed about the situation, that something good would come out of it.

The good that came out of it was time to reflect on how primal that longing for human connection felt. We are hardwired not just for dependence but for interdependence and to resonate with each other, to be each other's sounding boards. To love and be loved.

This poem also spoke to me on the 4th of February this year as I reflected on why news of a school-shooting, at a centre for adult education in Sweden, had hit me so deeply when I didn't know any of the victims. A main reason was that some of the victims had arrived during the 2015 refugee crisis.

That year, my parents in Sweden were heavily involved in supporting the group of refugees who were suddenly housed in their tiny village, in the middle of nowhere. It was an amazing year of revival for the village; over 75 new customers for the village shop, new children for the village school, community activities. Villagers came together around a shared purpose of welcome. My parents and their friends became like family to some of the new arrivals, who became like family to them and, by extension, they were for that time my family, too. I was, as John Donne, put it, "involved in mankind".

The refugees were eventually dispersed - some moving far, some staying locally, some staying in touch, some moving on - but for the last ten years, I have had the occasional update of their whereabouts.

And, when the extreme tragedy struck ten years later, the trauma was not local; it was national, international. An attack on a centre for adult education where the newly arrived had come to learn the local language, and others had come to train for essential work in healthcare, was an attack not just on individuals but on the communities that had welcomed them. It was also an attack on an essential part of what makes us civilised: education.

Most painfully, it was an attack on individuals. About 20 percent of those who are proud to call themselves Swedish are first generation immigrants, and one of those was Salim Iskef, who was 29, studying to be a nurse and engaged to be married. He could easily have been one of the young men looked after by my parents. He was one of 11 who died but, to paraphrase John Donne, any death diminishes us.

In a way, this is entry level empathy. Feeling sorry for and caring about people whose story we know, people that now feel familiar, is easy.

The real test of our moral mettle is whether we extend our empathy to those who don't feel familiar to us, whose story we don't know and, whether when we proudly, loudly and publicly call ourselves Christian, we also follow Christ's example of humility, tolerance and radical, self-less love and empathy.

Do we subscribe to a superficial cultural identity as Christians or are we followers of Christ? The Way of Christ is open to anyone but, beware, it can be costly.

Ahmed al Ahmed felt that cost. He is not a Christian, he is a Muslim, but he nonetheless showed Christ-like, selfless courage on the 14th of December, the first night of Hanukkah.

As a Jewish community gathered on Bondi Beach, Australia, to joyfully mark Hanukkah, a celebration of hope, Ahmed, a man who had no obligation to act and every reason to run away, chose to move, unarmed, towards danger, as he placed himself between a gunman and his Jewish neighbours. He wrestled the gun from the shooter, preventing further loss of life, but did so at a cost; he, himself, was shot twice.

When hatred is present in violent words or actions, it is these kinds of individual choices, whether we defend the vulnerable and whether we stand up against hatred, that define who we are.

The way of Christ is open to anyone. Following it means choosing. Do we choose to think highly of one another? Do we choose to bless those who curse us?

And I would just like to specifically address any Christians who endorse politicians who think us foreigners are in the

process of an enemy invasion. If you consider us enemies, Jesus gives unusually specific instructions here: Love your enemies.

The wider application of loving your enemy, the practice and practicality of what our Buddhist and Hindu friends call Ahimsa, and the broader discipline of non-violence, has rarely been more important.

In a few days, we celebrate and welcome the long-awaited Messiah, revealed not as a charismatic politician or loudmouth celebrity, not as a warlord, but as a child who issues a rallying call in the most innocent, weak voice of the universe; the cry of an infant, the Prince of Peace.

Most of us are only at the beginning of understanding what that cry means, only beginning to work out our disciplined, deliberate role as peacemakers, because we've been blessed to live in peace.

Let's talk, and keep talking, about what it truly means to be a follower of Christ.

The Prince of Peace is summoning us to wage peace, to resist forces of darkness that seek to divide us, forces that

narrow us down to small, defensive islands when we are part of a continent.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to go forward with faith, hope and love and be involved in mankind.

