

Good Tidings from Bethlehem

Thought for the Day

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I'm just back from one of my secular pilgrimages to Jerusalem, where I found myself pondering the curious incident of the dog in the night-time – and no, not because of last week's launch of Guy Ritchie's glitzy new Sherlock Holmes film!

We're all used to reports at this time of year about life in the little town of Bethlehem. But this year there was only a story complaining that the tourists came but didn't stay, and an interesting discussion about where Jesus was born – whether Bethlehem in Galilee rather than the Bethlehem beside Jerusalem. As in the original Sherlock Holmes story, this year the news hounds did nothing in the night-time.

Which is odd, because actually there are good tidings, surprisingly good, in fact – so perhaps that's why the dogs in the manger weren't interested! The Wall Street Journal recently reported that the West Bank economy is booming – in fact their stock market is rising faster than any in the world except Shanghai. I've seen myself that Ramallah has turned into one huge development site, with offices and apartment blocks rising all around, streets and markets crowded with shoppers, and – that universal index of prosperity – large numbers of luxury cars and 4x4s on the roads.

The landscape is also changing in both the West Bank and the so-called Arab "triangle" in the north of Israel, as many huge and imposing villas are being built, and a new town is planned by the Palestinian Authority north of Ramallah. Israeli scientists are helping local farmers develop new crops and products; Israeli charities are helping plant parks and provide services; and Israeli and Palestinian businesses are developing joint ventures.

Many of us pray for the peace of Jerusalem, but at this time of year, when the world turns its attention to the spiritual history of that holiest of places, we should all welcome these good tidings, stop taking sides with brother against brother, welcome these new efforts to turn swords into plough-shares, and pray for a happy and peaceful new year for all.

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