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As every schoolboy used to know, as Lord Macaulay almost put it, one of Thomas Cranmer's most beautiful Book of Common Prayer Collects is required to be read on all Sundays during the Holy Season of Advent.

The Advent Collect begins:

"Almighty God give us grace that we may cast away the Works of Darkness and put upon us the Armour of Light".

In today's FCDO Carol Service I thought it might be an interesting challenge to examine these two Cranmerian phrases.

To ask if they have any relevance to the Foreign Office, to our Foreign Policy and to our celebration of Christmas in 2020.

The Foreign Office has a long and honourable record of diplomatic jousting against a variety of Works of Darkness, in unsavoury corners of the world.

But fear – which can be a work of Darkness, is the one I would like to concentrate on today.

I entered the Foreign Office for the first time, as a 14 year old schoolboy, in the year 1956.

I was escorted up the grand staircase of this building into the office of the Foreign Secretary, who at the time was my Godfather, Selwyn Lloyd.

Uncle Selwyn, as I called him, gave me, as Secretaries of State are still wont to do, a tour d'horizon of the trouble spots of the world.

I remember coming away from that Godfatherly conversation thinking 'how fearful Her Majesty's Government apparently was about certain serious international problems'.

Britain was fearful about the military aggression of the Soviet Union which had just brutally crushed the Hungarian Uprising of 1956.

Britain was fearful about the threat to peace in the Middle East caused by Colonel Nasser, who had nationalised the Suez Canal, thus causing the Suez Crisis which was at fever pitch in Westminster and Whitehall in 1956.

And Uncle Selwyn was fearful over the Foreign Policy divisions of whether it would be right to confront Nasser, or appease Nasser.

These memories are a reminder of the uncomfortable truth that fear often drives Foreign Policy – and not only in this country.

A few years later, when I was a 23 year old War Correspondent in Vietnam, I remember being amazed, as a result of attending a briefing from the US Military Commander in Saigon, General Westmoreland, that one of the strongest justifications for having 500,000 US troops fighting in Vietnam (and Westmoreland was asking for another 100,000) was the so-called 'Domino Theory'.

The 'Domino Theory' was the great fear in Washington that if South Vietnam fell to Ho Chi Minh's Communists in the North then before long all the neighbouring countries like Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and so on would soon fall like Dominoes to the march of Communism through South East Asia.

My point here is that history teaches us that fear, however, rational or irrational often drives Government Policy.

It has been driving the Government's present policy towards the Pandemic. Here, in this Department, I surmise that there will be fear in some offices this week over the possibilities of a Bad Deal Brexit or a No Deal Brexit.

Now, before you start to think that I am going fearfully off piste in what is a Service of Christmas Celebration, let me turn to the Christmas Story and its tidings of comfort and joy.

But, before we get to the comfort and joy and celebration bit, truth compels me to give an historical reminder that fear played a big part in the unfolding of the Nativity.

"Do not be afraid" were the first words the Angels spoke to the terrified shepherds.

"Do not be afraid, Mary" was the earlier greeting of the Angel Gabriel at the moment of the Annunciation.

In an era when unmarried mothers in the hill villages of Judea were ostracised in disgrace, or even stoned to death for their disgrace, we can understand why Mary might have been frightened by the news of her holy pregnancy.

And then immediately after the birth of Jesus, every family in Bethlehem must have been rent asunder with fear when the Tyrant, Herod, ordered the slaughter of all male babies in his brutal, but unsuccessful, effort to kill the Infant Jesus.

So, at the first Christmas in Bethlehem and at Christmas in Britain some 2000 years later, fear was and is a real and present danger in many people's lives.

There is an important spiritual question to be asked here.

How do we reduce our fears, or even conquer our fears?

One answer to that question can be found by learning from Mary.

From Luke's Gospel we know that "she pondered these things in her heart" and prayed.

Advising people to pray in cynical secular Britain may seem a hopeless cause, yet a strange fact from the market research polling industry tells us that, while less than 5 per cent of the British public ever enter a church, or a mosque or any other place of worship from one year's end to another, including Christmas, Easter or Eid, nevertheless, 95 per cent of the population do admit to saying prayers at one time or another.

Why?

Could it be that somewhere inside each and every one of us there lies buried, however deeply, a spiritual hunger, spiritual instinct urging us to pray?

Mary, an uneducated village girl, had that instinct. She prayed.

And she was safely delivered of a Son, destined to be the Saviour of the World.

She gave birth, not in the NHS Bethlehem Maternity Hospital, but in a poor, probably unsanitary manger with the Oxen, rather than the Gynaecologists, standing by.

And afterwards, Mary prayed perhaps what is the greatest ever prayer of gratitude, known to us as "*The Magnificat*."

"My soul doth magnify the Lord
And my spirit doth rejoice in God my Saviour."

We can learn a lot from Mary's prayers of asking and her prayer of thanks.

So instead of being fearful this Christmas, why not try being grateful for God's mercies and blessings.

Such as: The superbly dedicated work of the NHS throughout the Pandemic.

The amazing scientific discoveries of the Scientists at Oxford University and elsewhere, who appear to have found new vaccines which will contain not only Corona Virus, but all sorts of other viral strains which, unvaccinated, might cause pandemics in the future.

The many individual acts of kindness and good neighbourliness which keep on occurring in local communities.

And perhaps through the fog of our fears we can even begin to see the emerging contours of a gentler, kinder, softer and less sharply materialistic Britain, which might embody the spirit of Christmas all the year round.

Like Mary, let us ponder these things in our hearts.

I wish you all an unfearful, grateful, happy and blessed Christmas. **Amen**