

Put your hand into the hand of God. Isaiah 41. 13. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 29 December 2010.

As you know, this is the last Coffee Morning of 2010. We now stand on the threshold of a new year. And for a few moments I want to put the clock back 71 years – to Christmas 1939 and to one of the most famous radio broadcasts ever made.

[Play the recording.]

That was, of course, King George VI, speaking three months after the outbreak of the Second World War. The poem from which he quoted had been written some 30 years before¹ by one Minnie Louise Haskins, when working as a missionary in India.² Minnie Haskins was then in her early 30s, having been born in Gloucestershire.³ Her poem was originally titled 'God knows', but, for obvious reasons, became known later as 'the Gate of the Year'.⁴ The lines the King quoted are good lines ...

I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown'. And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That will be better to you than light, and safer than a known way.

I understand that the story of Miss Haskins and her poem featured in a BBC Radio 4 broadcast last Saturday - on Christmas Day.⁵

Yes, they were good lines. But I want now to call on a contribution from a man ... a man who lived some time before Minnie Haskins. Today, December 29th, is the birthday of William Gladstone, one of the most famous British politicians of the nineteenth century.⁶ During his political career, Mr Gladstone served as Prime Minister four times, and four times as Chancellor of the Exchequer.⁷ The Bible was the spiritual and intellectual foundation of Mr Gladstone's life, and in 1891 he published a book under the title 'The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture' – in which he commended most strongly the trustworthiness of the Bible.

And, good as Miss Haskins lines are, it is from that 'Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture' – the best of all sources – which I wish now to quote. And, as, in the will of God, we soon face a new year, my text comes from chapter 41 of the prophecy of Isaiah, verse 13, '*I the Lord your God will hold your right hand, saying to you, Fear not; I will help you*'. Although in its context this assurance was addressed to the nation of Israel when in captivity in Babylon, we are surely entitled to take hold of this promise for ourselves. And we note that, as in the short series of talks we had before Christmas, our text includes the comforting words, 'Fear not' ... 'Fear not; I will help you'.

But the words on which we focus this morning are those which come immediately before that 'Fear not', namely, '*I the Lord your God will hold your right hand*'. In 'Our Daily Bread' for the 7th of October, the heading of the page read, 'Hold my hand', and the opening paragraph ran, 'The waves of Lake Michigan were high and splashing onto the pier one day as I followed a young family out to a lighthouse. I overheard the young girl say to her father: "Daddy, please walk alongside me and hold my hand at this scary part"'. And I guess ... with the onset of age, with possible health problems and with the uncertainties of the future ... we all find life rather 'scary' at times.

Nor ... with our eyes again on God's promise, '*I the Lord your God will hold your right hand*' ... is it difficult to picture many young children over the past few weeks being only too glad to know that, as they stepped out onto the snow and ice, their little hands were clasped firmly in the strong hands of their mother or father.

I say 'strong hands'; and so, relatively, they are. But you note, I trust, who it is that speaks to reassure His people in their time of need and fear ... '*I the Lord your God will hold your right hand*'. And we remember that this was the One to whom the psalmist spoke in prayer, '*In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth: and the heavens are the work of your hands*'.⁸ 'The heavens', mark you ... the observable part of which, we are told, comprises 100,000 million galaxies, each comprising perhaps 100,000 million stars. I think we can say that the hands which made every last one of these are indeed strong hands. Well did King George add to his quote from Miss Haskins' poem the words, '*May that Almighty Hand guide and uphold us all*'.

And thinking once more of that poem, and in particular of the words of man who stood at the Gate of the Year, '*Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God*', it isn't difficult to imagine young children being frightened to go out alone into the dark, especially if the way ahead is unknown, but who are not in the least afraid of either the darkness or the unknown if their father is there to hold their tiny hands. And I am reminded of the words of Job in the book which bears his name, '*By His (God's) light I walked through darkness*'⁹ – and I rejoice to know that the One who takes my hand as I venture forth into another year, with all its unknowns, is the selfsame One of whom King David once wrote, '*Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you*'.¹⁰

Well then did Miss Haskins have 'the man who stood at the Gate of the Year' say, '*Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That will be better to you than light, and safer than a known way*'.

We sometimes say, 'I don't know what the future holds but I know who holds the future'. And that is most wonderfully true. But just think ... that He who holds the future stoops to hold your hand as well!

'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God' – into the hand of Him who is, as Jude's doxology assures us, 'able to keep you from falling'.¹¹ And it is a source of immense comfort and peace to know that He is more than sufficient to meet whatever trials may lurk in the darkness ahead of us.

I have read that in 1346, during the so-called 'Hundred Years' War', the English army of King Edward III were heavily outnumbered by French troops at Crecy in northern France. The King's son, also Edward but known perhaps better as 'The Black Prince', who was then only 16 years old, led one of three British divisions, while Edward III stood nearby with a large force, ready to send relief where and when needed. During the battle, the prince thought he was in danger, so he sent for help. But none came. Young Edward sent another message, pleading for immediate assistance. Apparently his father responded by telling the messenger, 'Go tell my son that I am not so inexperienced a commander as not to know when help is needed, nor so careless a father as not to send it'.¹²

As we face 2011 with all its *unknowns*, we have one great '*known*' – that the Lord God, no less – that *the One who both knows when we need His help and who cares too much for us not to give it* – that He undertakes to hold our 'right hand, saying ... 'Fear not; I will help you'.

Having put into the mouth of 'the man who stood at the Gate of the Year' the now famous words, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That will be better to you than light, and safer than a known way', Miss Haskins added, 'So I went forth, and finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night'. *Let us too, with our hand in His, 'tread gladly' into another year*

I close by quoting lines from another lady whose life, as Miss Haskins', straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Fanny Crosby ...

Hold Thou my hand; so weak I am, and helpless,
I dare not take one step without Thy aid;
Hold Thou my hand; for then, O loving Saviour,
No dread of ill shall make my soul afraid.¹³

Footnotes

¹ In 1908.

² Which she did from 1906 to 1912.

³ At Warmesley.

⁴ The poem originally formed part of a small volume entitled 'The Desert'.

⁵ As it had also on 19 December.

⁶ His full name was William Ewart Gladstone, and he lived from 1809 to 1898.

⁷ Tracking very closely the reign of Queen Victoria, which spanned 1837 to 1901.

⁸ Psa. 102. 25.

⁹ Job 29. 3.

¹⁰ Psa. 139. 12.

¹¹ Jude 24.

¹² See http://www.preceptaustin.org/1_corinthians_commentaries_3.htm, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Crecy.

¹³ Written in 1879. See <http://homeschoolblogger.com/hymnstudies/653503/>. She later wrote, 'For a number of days before I wrote this hymn, all had seemed dark to me. That was indeed an unusual experience, for I have always been most cheerful; and so in my human weakness I cried in prayer, "Dear Lord, hold Thou my hand". Almost at once the sweet peace that comes of perfect assurance returned to my heart, and my gratitude for this evidence of answered prayer sang itself in the lines of the hymn'.