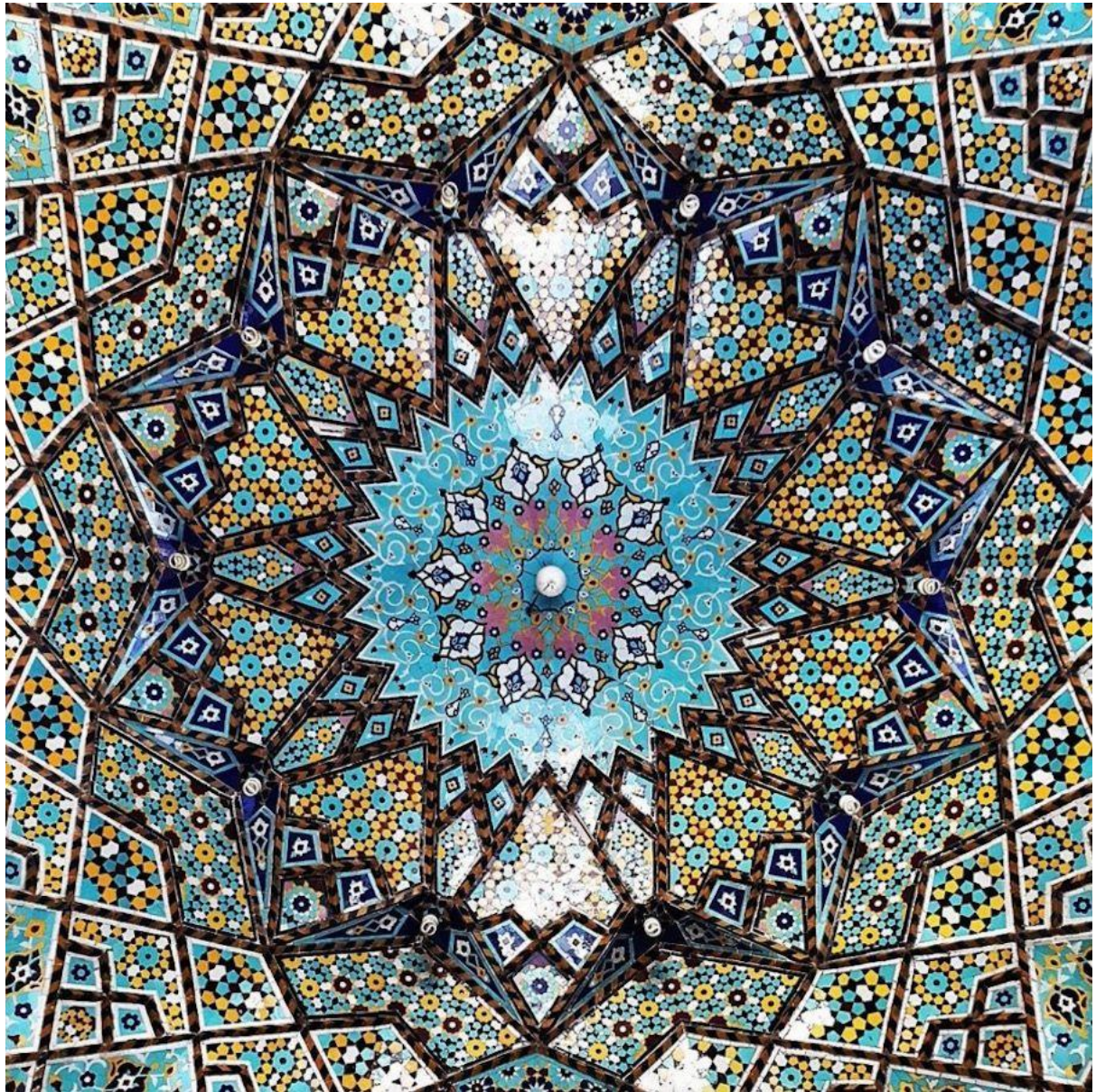


## A CHRISTMAS REFLECTION

The kaleidoscope of faith forever turns and the patterns shift. Light falls on the individual parts, but it is one light, unleashing infinite possibilities. And the light falls indiscriminately. Every particle is touched, drawn into the dance. Every speck matters and is placed.



Ceiling of Mosque, Persian

The uncertainty of our times should not drive us to believe the days are inevitably dark; there is no such inevitability. The light of God's faith falls upon us all and plants seeds of hope. But there is no denying it; we are seeing things through a very strange lens and they lack the clarity we would wish.

But I wonder if Covid blurs or perhaps sharpens the image in some situations where too often our focus blurs beyond the initially shocking headlines? Perhaps if you live in a refugee camp it lends sharper definition? Or what if you have been bereaved and there is no trace of a virus in your loss? Just a pressing ache on your heart. And what of a planet where throw away protective equipment has added to the daily toll of misery for other life forms, and the very oceans themselves?

A tough old year is now drawing to its close. 2020 has earned a meaning by association none of us could have imagined. Do we see more clearly? Over these weeks and months, we have all witnessed the play of light and shade. Paul's suggestion we see in a mirror dimly seems all too apt.

The lyrics of Jonny Nash's "I can see clearly now the rain is gone" will have to wait a bit yet! Or maybe not ... for the lyrics continue: "I can see all obstacles in my way". But so too we can discern symptoms of hope, possibilities. And I'm not talking only about vaccinations. Indeed, it is our faithful determination not remain immune to the needs of others that has often been the hallmark our presence to one another in these virulent days.

I write just as it is becoming the clear the rains have not gone, but there are glimmers of hope. London may be presently in tier 4, but thank God, the White House will soon be occupied by decency once more. The climate crisis, Covid crisis, justice denier will soon be on his way. Relax, my New Year's resolution is not to be less political!

I trust in 2021 we will actually witness the long overdue investment in our schools and hospitals, care homes and social (essential) services that should be the hallmark of a privileged and wealthy nation. And would that it would not be at the expense of the poor beyond our shores who, surprise, surprise have been kicked yet further down the list of our government's concerns. Overseas aid packaged for the tabloids.

I'm sure we can all look back on the last year, recognising acts of extraordinary care and love; so much accomplished, and much sustained by our human faith, kindness and love. And hard, determined graft. And woven through all of this the providential concern and prayers of God, a God who never seeks immunity from our human lot ... and that after all is what Christmas is all about. God come down to earth from heaven with all the risk that entails.

In the tradition of Islam, Mary mother of Jesus is revered, no less than her son. In the Holy Qur'an we read of Mary hearing she will bear a child. She is perplexed but reassured by the angel that these things have been decided. Typical! A male angel, albeit an immaculate one, tells a woman what's best.

Mary conceives and, uniquely, the Islamic story tells of her pain as she gives birth. It pulls no punches; she curses the day she was born. The miraculous and the human collide. Angels seldom promise a smooth road ahead. Their message isn't sugar-coated, at least not as we'd expect:



Mary, wrought with pain, clings to a tree. As the story unfolds, the angel points to the stream flowing by. Perhaps its cool waters might bring relief as she wipes her brow. But then the angel tells her to shake the tree. And as she shakes the tree, dates fall from its branches, lots and lots of sweet dates. Food, but not just any old food! Nutritious, full of sugar, energy, ripened under a constant sun.



Mary (Maryam) with Jesus under the date palm

So, in one tradition we see the story unfold under starlight, in another under a bright sun. But all under the same firmament. In both stories a young boy grows to manhood and his mother must watch through the lens of apprehension and love. His story will change lives. It will be kaleidoscopic.

In these days of rest and recreation, wondering and worry, hopes and fears, may the light of God's love seek us out. May there be some sweetness in these days, good food and fine wine. And may we be open to the voice of the angels who guide us to cool waters, shady trees and a place called hope.

Pax

James