Challenge 36 of 40

Reflection by Joanna Darby - Newcastle, Australia

What is it with me and kids' books and crying?! Really. I think it's the powerful combination of profound and well written words, accompanied by brilliant illustration that is uniquely able to convey a truth so deeply. But there is one added element that tips me over — the realisation that I'm sharing something very meaningful and important with my children. And that gets me every time.

"Wenceslas: The Eternal Christmas Story" by Geraldine McCaughrean, is one such picture book that moved me and has continued to have an effect on me. I remember picking it up at the library and flipping through it quickly, thinking 'oh it must be based on that Christmas song…no one really sings that song much, I wonder what it's actually about?’. The book endeared itself to me, was hunted down and purchased, and has become a favorite in our collection of Christmas stories that we read together during Advent.

Indeed it is based on the song 'Good King Wenceslas,' which itself is based on the life of Saint Wenceslas I, Duke of Bohemia, from early 10th Century. While in his lifetime only a duke, he was later conferred the title of King, apparently because of his honour and kindly heart. The story in the song (and picture book) may be legend, but appears to be based on the character and goodwill of Wenceslas who was known for leaving the palace on wintery nights to take offerings to the widows and orphans and most vulnerable in his city. The Christmas hymn was not written until 1853 (by JM Neale) and though it is familiar, it seems
to be one of those carols that is not paid much attention. I certainly had not taken much notice of it.

In the picture book, illustrator Christian Birmingham has created majestic images with pastels — impressionistic scenes of swirling snow in blues and greys and whites and glowing golden hues emanating from the palace. And the story comes to life…

“Snow laid siege to the city. Winter, grim and grey, held the world in its grip.”

It is blustery and icy out. And so the people of the city gather at the palace in its warmth and celebrate lavishly. Music. Dancing. Feasting. And then…

“… the King had to change everything. He did. He drew back a curtain, let in the draught, and looked out of the window.”

There. A penniless peasant.
The King calls a boy to follow as he determines to take Christmas to the peasant.
The servants rush to gather all the King has called for and express absolute confusion at his desire to go out on such a night.

The wind and snow howl around them and the boy falters and can’t seem to go on in the face of such a blizzard.
The snow is too deep. The cold is too savage.
Then the King, with an almost heavenly glow about him, radiating golden warmth, turns to him and tells him to walk behind him, in his tracks.

“And so that is what Peter did. He followed in his master’s footsteps. The holes left were big, like boots, and Peter slipped his feet into them. In went his feet and down, down into the warmth of a king’s tracks. And suddenly, somehow, Peter was not bogged down.”

Together they arrive at the small house at the edge of the woods and celebrate. Oh, how they celebrate!

This is a story I can read over and over again, and am moved almost to tears every time. A King who looked out of his palace — drew back the curtain to stare into the grim and grey.
A King who left his palace and braved the cold beyond in order to bring warmth and share his abundance…God with us?
A King who called another to follow. And not a great knight, but a weak and unlikely boy. One who could not face the bitter snow alone. One who was overwhelmed by the task, fearful of what lay ahead, daunted by the responsibility but who managed only by stepping in the King’s footsteps. By following after. Hiding his face from the biting wind in the back of the King’s cloak. Covered by the King. God with us.

And the King changed everything. He did.

Recalibrate

1) What is Jesus calling you to in the New Year? Is the way cold, dark, windy, ominous? What are your fears of what lies ahead, your own shortcomings or apprehensions about tasks and responsibilities you are facing?

2) In Jesus’ statement ‘follow me’ (Matthew 4:19, 16:24), we know that He goes before us and is always with us, but we also know that He bids us follow wherever He goes — and the way may not be easy. What does ‘follow me’ mean to you? Is it comforting or difficult to you? Why?