Thought for the Third Week in Advent
by Rev'd Alan Griggs, Lead Rural Chaplain

I cannot claim to be much of an art critic but the painting by the Flemish renaissance master Peter Bruegel has caught my attention this Advent in his painting of a village in Flemish Brabant, now one of the three regions of Belgium. The painting is called the 'Numbering' or 'Census' at Bethlehem and is based on Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 5:

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered... So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

The year before 'The Census at Bethlehem' was completed in 1566, much of Europe had been in the grip of the coldest winter for a hundred years and subsequent years proved to be among the coldest on record. In fact, this period is now called the 'little ice age'.

(Picture taken from: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-census-at-bethlehem)

Despite the obvious struggles and hardships that such a severe winter can bring, particularly for our farming and rural communities, the people seem to be carrying on with life regardless! And in the midst of all this busyness, a woman heavy with child and her carpenter husband ride into town. Can you spot them? This is an Advent moment. A moment when God's grace quietly enters the world to transform our priorities and offer us all a hope that comes from heaven. I wonder if Peter Bruegel's painting is deliberately full of people, so that we are forced to rest our gaze on the quiet arrival of grace and truth? Perhaps this wonderful grace requires us to stop, to notice, and to see what God has done, and is doing.

Every blessing to you all in the Derbyshire agricultural community this Christmas from the Derbyshire Rural Chaplaincy team.

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