

Carol Service 2025 – Bohemian Rhapsody

‘Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?’ Yeshua wondered aloud as he sat and shivered round the fire.

‘There he goes again,’ said Shimon, the oldest of Bethlehem’s shepherds, ‘young Yeshua – always dreaming, head in the clouds.’

‘That’s not true,’ Yeshua retorted. ‘Look at our lives: **caught in a landslide, no escape from reality.** There’s no future for people like us. And I know what you’re going to say to me: “**Open your eyes,** my boy, **look up to the skies and see.** Look at the stars, look at the wonderful heavens Yahweh has made. This is still a good world.” But what difference does that make to me now? **I’m just a poor boy, I need no sympathy** – I know what I am, and I say that I have no future.’

Yeshua’s father, Abbas, was listening quietly as usual to the debate. ‘Oh, my young Yeshe, you’re still the tearaway you always were. **Easy come, easy go.**’

‘Yeah that’s right,’ Eleazar butted in: ‘**Little high, little low.**’ That got a laugh from the group as they huddled for warmth. They could hear the flock bleating quietly in the cold air, just a few yards away.

Abbas got up, and started staring intently. ‘Wind’s changing direction. Something big’s coming. Could be a storm, those look like storm clouds to me.’

Yeshua was still sulking: ‘**Any way the wind blows, doesn't really matter to me,** does it?’ I’m still poor and I bet none of us can really afford those taxes the Emperor wants us to pay. You saw all those folks heading into town. Even saw a young lass about to pop, and nowhere to go. It’s not right, I tell you. We need a revolution now...’

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We need a revolution *now*: all these years later, the words still echoed inside his head. He’d never forget that night – it was seared into his brain like it was yesterday. Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see. And what a sight. He was nearly 50 now, but just the thought made the hairs stand up on the back of his head – his 15-year-old self seeing wonders no man had seen – at least not one who wasn’t stumbling out of the Bethlehem inn.

He heard the jangle of keys – a rough voice shouted out: ‘son of Abbas, you’ve got a visitor.’ That brought him out of his reverie and back to reality – there he was, in a prison cell in Jerusalem, waiting to die. Yeshua Barabbas, the terrorist, the murderer. He shouted out to the jailer: ‘Who is it?’

‘Oh my darling boy! What have you done?’ It was his mother, Abigail. Abbas and Abigail – when those two got together the whole village joked it was because they were always paired first on the school register.

The door opened, and a frail old woman came in, weeping loudly. She threw herself into his arms – at least as well as you can when your arms are chained to the wall. Despite his hard face, his years of violence, Yeshua found to his surprise that he was sobbing, too – quietly on Abigail’s shoulder.

‘Mama, I killed a man. Put my cudgel to his head, swung it harder, now he's dead. Oh, it's not as if my life has just begun, but now I've gone and thrown it all away. Oh mama, I don't mean to make you cry, but I’m for it this time. It’s the cross for me, and the jailer says it’s going to be quick. I’ve let you down mama, but **if I'm not back again this time tomorrow, carry on, please carry on – nothing really matters** any more.’

There they held each other for what seemed like hours, but was only minutes. Soon enough, the jailer came. Abigail clung on, but rough hands tore her away. 'I don't want to leave you,' she cried.

'Too late, mama, my time has come,' Yeshua whispered. 'And I'll be glad it's all over. Just the thought of it **sends shivers down my spine, body's aching all the time. Goodbye, mama, I've got to go, leaving you behind to face the truth** of what I am. I know I sent poor father to an early grave, and now I'm going to join him. **I don't wanna die - I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all!**'

'Don't say that, my boy,' Abigail turned one last time. 'Think about that night. Remember what your father used to say: "Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see." Even now, there may be hope.'

And with that, the door slammed shut. 'Look up to the skies? Fat chance of that in this cell,' Yeshua muttered to himself, the hard face returning. But even as he scowled, his shoulders slumped. Seeing his mother weeping had drained the last drop of energy from him. He sank slowly to the floor, his back rubbing against the hard stone of the wall until he was sat, legs splayed out. He was tired, so very tired. He felt himself drifting off to sleep...

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And there he was again – back on that hillside more than 30 years ago. Abbas' words about the storm had got all the shepherds to their feet – Shimon, Eleazar, and yes, even himself. 'Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see.' But what did **he see**? At first **a little silhouette of a man** – but was it a man, it looked like a man but much bigger and shining. Suddenly the storm came: **thunderbolt and lightning, very, very frightening indeed**, even for hard-bitten shepherds. The sheep were at risk.

But no, it wasn't a storm – the wind blew, like it always does over those hills. But no rain, and no clouds. What they thought were clouds were something else. Something like the bright shining man, but hundreds of them, thousands of them, swaying and singing: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

Those on whom his favour rests – they were looking at him, at the shepherds! They all stood there, transfixed. Eleazar and Shimon had sunk to their knees, praying. His father, Abbas, was actually laughing, a chuckle of pure joy, like liquid silver. 'You see, my son, enough of all this self-pity of yours: **"But I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me; just a poor boy from a poor family, spare him his life from this monstrosity."** What is there to feel sorry for yourself about now?'

Yeshua could feel the tension within himself, as joy and self-pity raged within him. He was the most cursed of boys, he was the most blessed of boys: which was it? Those words still rang around his head: **'Easy come, easy go, will you let me go?'** Yes, he wanted to but... **no, he couldn't let it go.** But he wanted to **let it go... but he couldn't let it go.** That rage, it still had a hold of him – **let me go, let me go... He felt as if Beelzebub himself had a devil put aside for him, just him,** always him.'

But then something happened. The shepherds, they were all on the move. Eleazar, Shimon, even his father Abbas – they were all leaving their sheep! 'Come on, son, we've got to go and see for ourselves. A Saviour has been born, the Messiah is here!'

Yeshua stumbled along behind them. The Messiah? Really? At tax time in Bethlehem? Not in Jerusalem? The older men were going so fast even young Yeshua had trouble keeping up. The outskirts of the town soon hove into view. They turned left into Hebron Road, then left again into Gath Close and suddenly there they were, outside a stable – and sure enough the young lass who was about to pop was there, with her bloke, and yes, the baby had been born. Here, among the animals and the dung. 'Nice start for a Messiah,' Yeshua thought to himself.

But his fellow shepherds were already kneeling and praying and woah, even crying – he'd never seen his dad cry. And suddenly Yeshua was there too – Yeshua Barabbas, stropky teenager, angry dreamer – kneeling and praying and crying and looking into the face this baby. The rage, the self-pity was gone – pure joy. 'Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see...'

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He was woken by the jangle of keys again. 'On your feet, Barabbas,' the jailer manhandled him up and fixed the leg irons before he undid the hand chains. 'You've got a second chance. Governor is going to free a prisoner and it's going to be you or that crazy calls-himself-a-king bloke.'

'Huh,' Yeshua thought. **'So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye? So you think you can love me and leave me to die? They can't do this to me – I just gotta get right outta here.'**

He ascended the steps to the Stone Pavement – there was the Judgment Seat in front of him. On it sat Pontius Pilate, robed in purple, the symbol of everything Barabbas hated. And there, to the left of him, there was another man – barely recognisable as a man, thought Yeshua, he's had a hell of a beating.

As he approached, the man looked up briefly, straight into Barabbas' eyes... and instantly he knew. He was looking into the eyes of the baby he'd worshipped all those years ago, the one who'd cleansed him of all that rage, all that self-pity. It hadn't lasted – the years had got the better of him. But it was him – really him!

The crowds were shouting, Pilate was washing his hands, but he couldn't see or hear anything anymore. It was like a dream. All these years he'd had it wrong. The Messiah really *had* been born – and now this Messiah, this bloody mess of a man, was going to save him.

As the chains were loosened from his feet, Barabbas stumbled over towards him. He tried to kneel, but a circle of guards quickly formed around him and led him away.

Barabbas looked up – the skies were darkening, storm clouds were gathering again. The words of his father on the hillside rang in his ears: 'Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see...'

He thought about the motto of his gang of rebels: **'Nothing really matters, anyone can see, nothing really matters to me**, to any of us – except revolution.' How wrong he had been! What was good news about his form of revolution? But there on the hillside, he'd *seen* it. There in that stable, he'd *felt* it. Good news of great joy for all the people. For his shepherd friends and family, for Bethlehem, for the crowds baying and spitting blood, even for that corrupt shell of a man, the Governor.

As he walked through the streets of Jerusalem in the early morning, a free man, the wind was getting up again. And he remembered something he'd heard about Jesus of Nazareth, something he'd taught: 'The wind blows where it pleases, you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going – but you can feel its impact.' God with us, God *among* us. Immanuel.

Any way the wind blows, he thought – I'll blow with it. I'll follow that wind, the wind of the Messiah I knew and yet I also never knew – until now.

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As we gather here today, and my tale ends, can I leave us all with one question:

Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see....

Does it really matter, does it really matter – to me?