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Tidings of Comfort & Joy

A Fellowship & Fairydust
Literary Christmas Newsletter





A WORD FROM THE TEAM

After the long summer, a note of crispness finally tinges the air, and birds make ready to head to warmer climes as the leaves turn a kaleidoscope of vibrant shades and crisply blanket the hardening ground. It's almost hard to believe that 2021 will soon be at an end.

This year has been challenging for our entire human family. Winter usually welcomes a time for a much-needed retreat from the world, for spending time with those we love and resting up so that we can greet the new year with renewed vigour and purpose. As Dame Edith Sitwell said, *"Winter is the time for comfort, for good food and warmth, for the touch of a friendly hand and for a talk beside the fire: it is the time for home."*

For some of us, though, spending time with our loved ones simply isn't possible just now and, after a year of enforced isolation, retreat can seem less like a reward for a year's hard work. While our overall situation may be better than this time a year ago, there remains a necessity to modify or limit family gatherings and spiritual events all across the world this winter, and an introspective focus on the world of the imagination, of literature, and media is more important than ever, as; *"There are adventures of the spirit and one can travel in books and interest oneself in people and affairs. One need never be dull as long as one has friends to help, gardens to enjoy and books in the long winter evenings."* – D. E. Stevenson.

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UPCOMING ISSUE

The next themed issue for winter 2021/2022 will cover Saints and Sages, including biblical figures, canonized saints and others of religious and spiritual significance from a variety of backgrounds, such as Saint Catherine of Sienna, Rumi, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Wesley

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TABLE OF CONTENTS



Advent Poem

St. John of the Cross, Page 5

The Journey

Hannah Skipper, Page 6

The Shepard's Carol

Bob Chilcott, Page 7

The Desire of All Our Race

Gregory Wilcox, Page 8

O Watchman, Watchman

Sophia Helmkamp, Page 11

The Burning Babe

St. Robert Southwell, Page 12

The Box the Held the Songs

G. Conner Salter, Page 13

Theophanies

Sarah Bingham, Page 16

Christmas Eve Meditation

Pope St. John XXIII, Page 17

The Wild Wood Carol

John Rutter, Page 19

Christmas Choirs

Amanda Pizzolato, Page 20

Christmas Day Sermon

St. Augustine of Hippo, Page 23

What Child Is This?

Williams Chatterton Dix, Page 25

You Were in Bethlehem,

Don't You Remember

Lawrence "Mack" Hall, Page 26

Homily of the Virgil of the Nativity

St. Bonaventure, Page 27

Christmas Mishaps

David Glenn, Page 30

The Dawn Carol

Abigail Falanga, Page 33

Finding Uncertainty in

an Uncertain World

Benjamin Fearn, Page 34

The House of Christmas

G.K. Chesterton, Page 36

Christmas Reflection 2021

Elizabeth Roper, Page 38

Annunciation

Jalal-al-din Rumi, Page 41

Muslim Thoughts on Jesus, Page 43

Vision of the Nativity

St. Brigid of Sweden, Page 52

Meditation on a Eucharistic

Christmas Carol

S. Kirk Pierzchala, Page 55



Mary's Lullaby
George MacDonald, Page 56

Noel
J.R.R. Tolkien, Page 57

*Let Us Envision: A Christmas
Reflection on St. Joseph*
The Traveling Troubadour, Page 58

For a King on his Birthday
Leah Fisher, Page 61

Tin Soldier
C.S. Lewis, Page 62

*Can We Eat, Drink,
and be Merry This Christmas?*
Phillip Booth, Page 64

The Ancient Yule of the Forest
Ray E. Lipinski, Page 67

A Savior of a Saviour
Sean Earner, Page 69

The History of Light
Regan King, Page 72

The Hidden Light
Warren Herman, Page 75

The Strange Gift
Michael Haldas, Page 77

Christmas Tears
Avellina Balestri, Page 79

*The Real Meaning of
Our Christmas Traditions*
Father Gerard Hatton, Page 80

*The Archbishop Preaches in the
Cathedral on Christmas Morning, 1170*
T.S. Eliot, Page 82

Down in Yon Forest, Page 85

Christmas Trees & Decorations

Pages 86-96

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Original Artwork, "Lady Mary" - Painted by Zaineb Sajjad Al, Page 97



Advent Poem

By St. John of the Cross

If you want, the Virgin will
come walking down the road
pregnant with the Holy and say,
“I need shelter for the night.
Please take me inside your heart,
my time is so close.”

Then, under the roof of your soul,
you will witness the sublime intimacy,
the divine, the Christ, taking birth forever,
as she grasps your hand for help,
for each of us is the midwife of God, each of us.

Yes, there, under the dome of your being,
does creation come into existence eternally,
through your womb, dear pilgrim,
the sacred womb of your soul,
as God grasps our arms for help:
for each of us is His beloved servant never far.

If you want, the virgin will
come walking down the street,
pregnant with Light, and sing!

The Journey

By Hannah Skipper

If, as it is said, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step then He has done so much more to find us, to reclaim us. The rescue mission began when we walked away from perfection, when we walked away from our life in the garden with Him, through Him, and in Him.

As the centuries rolled past, He gave us the Law, not to save us by it, but that we would come to know we couldn't save ourselves. Then He sent the Prophets to remind us He wasn't finished. He did not intend to leave us with the insurmountable pressure of our own effort. They told us to hope for something better yet to come.

When His presence was announced to the Virgin, the annunciation was the herald of a new phase in His plan. He would not leave us with our own pitiful efforts any longer. It was a proclamation meant to fill us with joy.

The road to Bethlehem was anything but easy. The Virgin and her betrothed walked and rode from Galilee. The Shepherds came from the fields and the magi from the East. All came through a weary rudderless world, drawn by the Child who is peace that passes understanding.

A sprint to the Cross began on that night. Thirty-three years are like the blink of an eye compared to all that had been before. He healed the sick and wounded, comforted the lost and hurting, and instructed those who honestly came to Him. Then He gave Himself, a sacrifice made possible by His own great love, to save us all.

But the journey isn't over. His thirty-three years on earth was not the final stretch. We are now to carry on. We take up the Cross. He is beside us, encouraging us, instructing us, guiding us to complete the journey home to Him.

THE SHEPHERD'S CAROL

COMPOSED BY BOB CHILCOTT

WE STOOD ON THE HILLS, LADY
OUR DAY'S WORK DONE
WATCHING THE FROSTED MEADOWS
THAT WINTER HAD WON.
THE EVENING WAS CALM, LADY
THE AIR SO STILL
SILENCE MORE LOVELY THAN MUSIC
FOLDED THE HILL.
THERE WAS A STAR, LADY
SHONE IN THE NIGHT
LARGER THAN VENUS IT WAS
AND BRIGHT, SO BRIGHT.
A VOICE FROM THE SKY, LADY
IT SEEMED TO US THEN
TELLING OF GOD BEING BORN
IN A WORLD OF MEN.
AND SO WE HAVE COME, LADY
OUR DAYS WORK DONE
OUR LIVES, OUR HOPES, OURSELVES
WE GIVE TO YOUR SON

The Desire of All Our Race

By Gregory Wilcox

Two figures embody Advent: one, obvious by his irrepressible presence, the other hidden in her quiet faith. Taken together, they instruct us not only in the true meaning of Advent, but in the real meaning of our lives.

St John Baptist embodies the prophets of the Old Testament: his birth echoes those of Isaac, Jacob and Samuel the Prophet; his harsh, desert life followed the pattern of the fiery Elijah, down to his clothes and crickety diet; John's fierce denunciations of sin and corruption recall the grim warnings of Ezekiel and Jeremiah; and, like Isaiah, he died on the orders of an evil king. But most of all, he is of their number because St John summed up in himself message of the Old Testament: he pointed to Christ, the Savior Who was coming.

Another, however, embodies the promises of the New Testament: one who doesn't point towards the Coming One, but who actually brings Him into the world: the maid of Nazareth, the Virgin who all generations call blessed, the Mother who carried God in her body, whose soul was pierced at the foot of the Cross, the Woman of the Apocalypse, wrapped in the brightness of the sun, standing on the moon, crowned with the twelve stars of the Testaments. As we come to the final days of Advent (called anciently in the Christian East "the Fore-feast of the Nativity"), St Mary the Virgin, like her cousin St John Baptist, points us to her Son, not hidden in the words of ancient prophecy, but waiting in her pregnant womb.

Before we sing our Eucharistic “Holy, Holy, Holy,” this Sunday, Bishop Ng’anga will read the Proper Preface we use the final Sunday of Advent, written in Milan 1500 years ago, which sums up the hopes of our fallen race in this season and in our lives. It joins the sober truths of the Old Testament with the grace-filled promises of the New:

“Because Christ, the One foretold by the ancient Prophets; the One carried in the womb of His Virgin Mother; the One proclaimed by John and brought forth by Mary, the One Who fulfills the desire of the Patriarchs and Prophets, the Priests and Kings of old, and of all our race since Father Adam and Mother Eve, He Whom all have longed for is now coming among us.”

The Baptist and the Virgin aren’t cardboard characters. Consider their tales: the Baptist leaping with joy while still in his mother’s womb at the presence of Christ, still in *His* Mother’s womb; walking the Judean desert, hermit-like, searching for God in the scorching wilderness; snarling threats at the self-righteous Pharisees while gently immersing in the cool waters of the Jordan those who sought God in penitence; scorning the executioner’s axe in his attempt to drive the adulterous Herod to repentance. Was there ever a man who so plainly showed what it means to be a man?

When God sent the Archangel Gabriel to Nazareth, it wasn’t in hopes of finding a virgin who was willing to go along with the plan that “a virgin shall conceive.” The Gospel the deacon will read Sunday morning is plain: “...the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.”

The Lord didn't choose Mary that morning. With God there are no mornings: what we perceive as past, present and future are all one with Him. Before Mother Eve dropped the apple on the ground in Paradise, God chose Mary to be the New Eve, Mother of His Messiah and Mother of His Church. What God created women to be, which Eve had flubbed in the Garden, came to life in Mary.

If our Advent is to come to fruition, to be more than shopping days till Christmas, if our lives are to grow into the fulness of Christ as men and women, children of God, look to St John the Baptist and St Mary the Theotokos. We'll see something of what God means us to be.



O Watchman, Watchman

By Sophia Helmkamp

**O Watchman, Watchman, tell me what you see,
Tell me what clarion call has stirred your blood;
Long, long this night has been, and long have we
In darkness struggled 'gainst the whelming
flood.**

**O tell me we'll at last see morning break,
At last proclaim the rightful King draws near;
I long to hear the cry, "Awake! Awake!"
I long to taste and touch our Triumph dear.**

**O let our weary lips now raise the song
That we at last may doff our battledress;
So many times we've cried, "O Lord, how long?"
As we for Dayspring yearned in great distress.**

**O may our wait be o'er, our battle done,
Our hope fulfilled in final victory;
Glad tidings I have heard of rising sun—
O Watchman, Watchman, tell me what you see!**

THE BURNING BABE

BY ST. ROBERT SOUTHWELL

AS I ON HOARY WINTER'S NIGHT
STOOD SHIVERING IN THE SNOW,
SURPRISED I WAS WITH SUDDEN HEAT
WHICH MADE MY HEART TO GLOW;
AND LIFTING UP A FEARFUL EYE
TO VIEW WHAT FIRE WAS NEAR,
A PRETTY BABE ALL BURNING BRIGHT
DID IN THE AIR APPEAR;
WHO, SCORCHED WITH EXCESSIVE HEAT,
SUCH FLOODS OF TEARS DID SHED
AS THOUGH HIS FLOODS
SHOULD QUENCH HIS FLAMES
WITH WHICH HIS TEARS WERE FED.
"ALAS!" QUOTH HE, "BUT NEWLY BORN
IN FIERY HEATS I FRY;
YET NONE APPROACH
TO WARM THEIR HEARTS
OR FEEL MY FIRE BUT II

MY FAULTLESS BREAST THE FURNACE IS
THE FUEL WOUNDING THORNS,
LOVE IS THE FIRE, AND SIGHS THE SMOKE,
THE ASHES SHAME AND SCORNS;
THE FUEL JUSTICE LAYETH ON,
AND MERCY BLOWS THE COALS,
THE METAL IN THIS FURNACE WROUGHT
ARE MEN'S DEFILED SOULS,
FOR WHICH AS NOW ON FIRE I AM
TO WORK THEM TO THEIR GOOD,
SO WILL I MELT INTO A BATH
TO WASH THEM IN MY BLOOD."
WITH THIS HE VANISHED OUT OF SIGHT
AND SWIFTLY SHRUNK AWAY
AND STRAIGHT I CALLED UNTO MIND
THAT IT WAS CHRISTMAS DAY.



The Box that Held the Songs

by G. Connor Salter

The box was probably dated even when my parents bought it. A long, squat black box with slots for cassette tapes, a thin shelf for inserting CDs, dials that were not to be spun, buttons that clacked and popped. It sat in the corner of the living room, adjacent to the huge stone fireplace. It was a huge room in a huge house, and there were other things in it. I remember the room held looming black bookshelves, a painting of a neighborhood lined with palm trees, a window covering almost an entire wall. Somehow, whenever I remember that room, the box comes up more than anything else.

The box felt important. It was a way to hear Garrison Keillor's stories about "Guy Noir, Private Eye," when we got home from church. It wasn't until nearly a decade later I discovered that Guy Noir was one of many characters on a program I only gotten glimpses of. The box also seemed alive at times. Whenever a tape or CD was inserted, a thin line of reddish lights appeared on top of the buttons. The lights rose and fell, appeared and faded as the noises changed. It was like watching a dragon smack its lips, reveal and unveil its teeth.

One late November day, when I was perhaps six, the box was surrounded by packing materials. Cardboard boxes, tissue paper, Christmas lights and plastic crates covered the tiled floor. The adults were “getting ready for Christmas.” At some point during this bustle, one of my parents took a CD out of a plastic case. The cover read “Michael W Smith: Christmas Time” and showed a man with bowed head in a red sweatshirt, standing on a wicker chair in a snowfield. The CD went into the box, and the adults kept working. I sat in the room’s corner and listened as the music began.

Stringed instruments came in first. Then several voices began singing a wordless melody. Then electronic instruments and bells arrived, then a choir came in:

Ring Christmas bells,
ring them loud,
with the message ringing
peace on the earth, tidings of good cheer...
Come carolers
come and join with the angels
singing joy to the earth,
Christmas time is here again...

It wasn’t a liturgical song exactly – the electronic instruments ruled that out. But for a Protestant boy attending Air Force chapel services, it was as close as I would get for a long time. I stayed in the corner as the song played. It felt like I couldn’t move.

I knew that the box wasn't making the noise. I wasn't clear on exactly what CDs or tapes did, but I recognized the song had a singer that I had heard on my father's car stereo. That meant the disk put the music into the box, and could take it elsewhere. Years later, staying in a small hostel in Mongolia, I would discover the CD's title and buy a copy for myself.

Something about that moment, and that box, made the song feel much more. It permeated the room, sent it ringing into my ears and around the plastic crate of Christmas books. It etched the scene – the tiled floor, the cluttered boxes, the line of battered cassette tapes in front of the box – into my mind. Everything about that scene became Christmas time for me.



Theophanies

By Sarah Bingham

**Wise men came from the east
They travelled from afar.
They knew the way and where to go –
God led them by a star.**

**God often sends a messenger
If there's something to tell,
So shepherds, Joe and Mary
All encountered an angel.**

**When Herod asked a hard question
His wise men knew to look
For God has often spoken with men
Who put His words in a Book.**

**When people lay right down to sleep
It may be there's a theme
To what they see or experience
As God speaks in their dream.**

**Sometimes it happens when awake,
That God gives you a mission;
You see something that is not there
When God uses a vision.**

**Now there are times when sight won't do
And then God makes a choice
From burning bush or empty sky
You just might hear God's voice.**

**I have not time to speak of conscience,
Of nature, or of miracles.
Pray God you do not hear an ass
Or see Him writing on the walls!**

CHRISTMAS EVE MEDITATION

BY POPE ST. JOHN XXIII

NIGHT HAS FALLEN; THE CLEAR, BRIGHT STARS ARE SPARKLING IN THE COLD AIR; NOISY VOICES RISE TO MY EAR FROM THE CITY, VOICES OF THE REVELERS OF THIS WORLD WHO CELEBRATE WITH MERRYMAKING THE POVERTY OF THEIR SAVIOR. AROUND ME IN THEIR ROOMS, PEOPLE ARE ASLEEP, AND I AM STILL WAKEFUL, THINKING OF THE MYSTERY OF BETHLEHM.

MARY AND JOSEPH, KNOWING THE HOUR IS NEAR, ARE TURNED AWAY BY THE TOWNSFOLK, AND GO OUT INTO THE FIELDS TO LOOK FOR A SHELTER. I AM A POOR SHEPHERD; I HAVE ONLY A WRETCHED STABLE, A SMALL MANGER, SOME WISPS OF STRAW. I OFFER ALL OF THESE TO YOU; BE PLEASED TO COME INTO MY POOR HOVEL.

I OFFER YOU MY HEART; MY SOUL IS POOR AND BARE OF VIRTUES. THE STRAWS OF SO MANY IMPERFECTIONS WILL PRICK YOU AND MAKE YOU WEEP - BUT OH, MY LORD, WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT? THIS LITTLE IS ALL I HAVE. I AM TOUCHED BY YOUR POVERTY. I AM MOVED TO TEARS, BUT I HAVE NOTHING BETTER TO OFFER YOU.

JESUS, HONOR MY SOUL WITH YOUR PRESENCE, ADORN IT WITH YOUR GRACES. BURN THIS STRAW AND CHANGE IT INTO A SOFT COUCH FOR YOUR MOST HOLY BODY.

JESUS, I AM HERE WAITING FOR YOUR COMING. WICKED MEN HAVE DRIVEN YOU OUT, AND THE WIND IS LIKE ICE. I AM A POOR MAN, BUT I WILL WARM YOU AS WELL AS I CAN. AT LEAST BE PLEASED THAT I WISH TO WELCOME YOU WARMLY, TO LOVE YOU AND SACRIFICE MYSELF FOR YOU.

COME, COME, JESUS, I AWAIT YOU. COME, BE MY GUEST!



THE WILD WOOD CAROL

COMPOSED BY JOHN RUTTER

SING O THE WILD WOOD, THE GREEN HOLLY
THE SILENT RIVER AND BARREN TREE
THE HUMBLE CREATURES THAT NO MAN SEES
SING O THE WILD WOOD

A WEARY JOURNEY ONE WINTER'S NIGHT
NO HOPE OF SHELTER, NO REST IN SIGHT
WHO WAS THE CREATURE THAT BORE MARY?
A SIMPLE DONKEY

AND WHEN THEY CAME INTO BETHL'EM TOWN
THEY FOUND A STABLE TO LAY THEM DOWN
FOR THEIR COMPANIONS THAT CHRISTMAS
NIGHT
AN OX AND AN ASS

AND THEN AN ANGEL CAME DOWN TO EARTH
TO BEAR THE NEWS OF THE SAVIOR'S BIRTH
THE FIRST TO MARVEL WERE SHEPHERDS
POOR
AND SHEEP WITH THEIR LAMBS

SING O THE WILD WOOD, THE GREEN HOLLY
THE SILENT RIVER AND BARREN TREE
THE HUMBLE CREATURES THAT NO MAN SEES
SING O THE WILD WOOD

Christmas Choirs

By Amanda Pizzolatto

**Oh listen, listen, how the bells doth ring
Echoing over the blankets of winter's sting
Like a single candle flickering in the night
Giving off some hope, warmth and light
Burn bright, burn long, and send incense up
above**

Like the Seraphim burning bright with love

**Oh listen, listen, the chimes are jingling on by
Almost like the twinkling of the stars in the sky
Each so tiny yet so many piercing the dark
Looking down on a land so bleak and stark
Shine high, shine strong, and send hope down to
Earth**

Like the Cherubim announcing the royal birth

**Oh listen, listen, the drums are rumbling deep
Yet so soft and low it's lulling you to sleep
A steady rhythm, coming from deep within
Like the thrumming of rain or a deep,
thundering din**

**Tap firm, tap sweet, and keep in time to the
lovely beat**

While Thrones carry God on His Heavenly Seat

**Oh listen, listen, to the piano, such a steady
friend**

**Being there for you until the very end
Every key being pressed, like the sea crashing
upon sand**

**And octaves ranging between sky and land
Scale high, scale low, and hear them thundering
near**

While Dominions tell us we have no need to fear

**Oh listen, listen, the violins are strumming out a
tune**

**Reminding us the Lord will be arriving soon
And like budding sprouts herald the arrival of
Spring**

**So too the signs indicate the coming of the King
Bow fast, bow slow, the Lamb of God is born
And winged Virtues spread the word before morn**

**Oh listen, listen, the flutes are twirling around
Producing a sweet and joyful sound
Telling us that we should all rejoice and dance**

**God has given humanity another chance
Pipe sweet, pipe quick, and invite us to our feet
While Principalities offer melodies so sweet**

**Oh listen, listen, the trumpets are being blown
Announcing that the Prince of Lies will be
overthrown**

**But not through sword or force will come his defeat
Yet he will be crushed by the Woman's feet
Blow fierce, blow quick, and herald the Lord's great
victory
As Archangels battle to save souls from eternal
misery**

**Oh listen, listen, to voices as deep as the sea
Singing a chant worshipping the Godhead Three
Of peace on Earth and goodwill to men
And of the Son come to free us of sin
Sing high, sing low, as we are saved from our plight
While Angels guard and guide both day and night**



CHRISTMAS DAY SERMON

BY ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

The Word of the Father, by Whom all time was created, was made flesh and was born in time for us. He, without whose divine permission no day completes its course, wished to have one day set aside for His human birth. In the bosom of His Father, He existed before all the cycles of ages; born of an earthly mother, He entered upon the course of the years on this day.

The Maker of man became Man that He, Ruler of the stars, might be nourished at His mother's breast; that He, the Bread, might hunger; that He, the Fountain, might thirst; that He, the Light, might sleep; that He, the Way, might be wearied by the journey; that He, the Truth, might be accused by false witnesses; that He, the Judge of the living and the dead, might be brought to trial by a mortal judge; that He, Justice, might be condemned by the unjust; that He, Discipline, might be scourged with whips; that He, the Foundation, might be suspended upon a cross; that Courage might be weakened; that Healer might be wounded; that Life might die.



To endure these and similar indignities for us, to free us, unworthy creatures, He who existed as the Son of God before all ages, without a beginning, deigned to become the Son of Man in these recent years. He did this although He who submitted to such great evils for our sake had done no evil and although we, who were the recipients of so much good at His hands, had done nothing to merit these benefits. Begotten by the Father, He was not made by the Father. He was made Man in the mother whom He Himself had made, so that He might exist here for a while, sprung from her who could never and nowhere have existed except through His power.

What Child is This?

William Chatterton Dix

What Child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Christ, the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary!

Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.

This, this is Christ, the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary!

So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king to own Him.
The King of kings salvation brings;
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.

This, this is Christ, the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary!

You Were in Bethlehem – Don't You Remember?

By Lawrence “Mack” Hall

When you were a little child you knelt before
The Infant Jesus there in Bethlehem
Among the animals you placed your toys:
Barbie and Buzz, and Woody the Cowboy too

Even the Wise Men smiled to hear you sing
To the Holy Family your baby songs
In cold Judaea in the long ago
The Christmas story is true, and you were there

And so forever

You are a Christmas child and kneel before
The Infant Jesus – here in Bethlehem



Homily of the Vigil of the Nativity

By St. Bonaventure

It is impossible to find adequate analogies between natural phenomena and things above the natural order; yet we can see that the way things come to birth differs in different cases: the way brightness comes from light is not the way the Shoot grows in the vine or the flower springs from the branch or tree-trunk.

Brightness is a product of light and is of the same nature as light; but we cannot say that light is the same thing as brightness or that brightness is identical with light. Similarly, the Son comes from the Father and is of the same nature as the Father, but the Son is not the Father and the Father is not the Son. Hence, in her commemoration of this glorious birth the Church calls Christ the Brightness of eternal Light.

When a shoot springs up in a vine, the vine has become fruitful and reached fulfillment; yet the vine is as whole as it was before, and nothing has been soiled or damaged. That is the way God was produced, or conceived, in the Virgin: he was her fulfillment and her fruit; he did not crush or force or stain her: he sanctified her.

Therefore, comparing the Child within her to a shoot, the Lord made the prophet say, I will raise up from the stock of David a faithful scion; and again, You heavens, send dew from above, you skies, pour down upon us the rain we long for, him, the Just One. Let the earth be opened and bud forth a Savior. The blessed Virgin was humble, firm and fruitful, like the earth. Like the earth she opened—not physically, to receive corruption, but spiritually, when she believed what the angel told her; and in that fruitful earth the Savior was formed, like a bud.

When a flower appears on a branch or a tree, it is not a sign of decay; it is an embellishment. It does no harm to what it grows from; it is merely an additional beauty. So also when God was born, there was no opening or corrupting of the Virgin's body, for shut this gate must ever be, Ezekiel said, nor open its doors to give man entrance. There was only the addition of fruitfulness and extra beauty. Hence Christ's birth is compared to the emergence of a flower: From the stock of Jesse a scion shall burgeon yet; out of his roots a flower shall spring.

Thus, before he was born in the womb, the Son of Mary was born of God the Father as brightness is born of light; conceived in the womb, he came to the Virgin Mother as a shoot comes to a vine; he emerged from the womb as flowers do from branches and stems and the trunks of trees. At his first birth he was born—and always will be born, throughout eternity—of God the Father: and that was his divine birth. At his second birth—his conception—and at his third, he was born of the Virgin Mother: and those were his human births.

His second and third births are revealed to us on earth for our healing; his first will be shown us in heaven for our reward. The second is the object of today's commemoration, with its reading about his life in the womb; the third is the occasion of tomorrow's feast, with its chant, "For our sakes a child is born"; the first will be our theme for all eternity.



Christmas Mishaps

By David Glenn

It's probably pretty cliché to say this, but Christmas is my favorite holiday. I grew up loving the lights and magic this season brings, and the spirit I feel is always welcoming. Still, I have to admit there were a few times that Christmas had its downsides. One such instance goes back to when I was a boy living in Anchorage, Alaska. I was getting my breakfast when we ran out of milk. At this point we were using carton containers, so I grabbed another assuming it was more milk. It was after I poured it into my cereal and took a bite that I noticed something: It didn't taste like milk.

I looked at the carton, and realized I had instead grabbed the eggnog! Needless to say I didn't enjoy eggnog in my cereal. I also committed to never drinking eggnog again, which I broke this year. Still, I look back and chuckle to myself at that mishap. At least no one was recording to send to AFV.

But I still enjoy the Christmas season year after year despite the eggnog incident. Still, it wasn't the only mishap to happen to me around Christmastime during my childhood. There was one time during one year where I almost broke the rule to not open presents until Christmas morning. Hey, it's always hard to wait for that special morning.

Plus it never made sense to me why I saw presents under the tree before Christmas morning, especially since they were supposed to be delivered from Santa on Christmas Eve.

Anyway, I noticed that there was one particularly large present with my name on it. I did my best to stay away and wait until Christmas morning. However, I kept coming back to it, and it didn't help that that year we had the tree set up next to the stairs. Plus that present was at the back of the tree, which was against the railing that kept people from falling from the living room down the stairs.

Temptation got the better of me and I started opening it. It wasn't humongous. It started with a tiny tear, and then I kept coming and taking a bit more and more. I could see what was underneath was bright and attractive. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn't stop myself.

Just a little bit here. Okay, go away.

Back again. What is it? Maybe just a little more.

Wow, this is... what am I getting? I have to know.

Thankfully, someone heard paper tearing, and my parents came over with our friends and saw what I had done.

I don't remember if I got into trouble or not, but I know I didn't do it again after that. Thankfully I didn't end up on Santa's naughty list, though the next day the hole in the wrapping was gone.

I'm pretty sure someone wrapped it again.

Just so you know what it was that had caught my attention, it was a board game called Pokémon Master Trainer.

It was so beautiful to my younger mind. My brothers and I loved playing that game so much over the years it's a miracle it still has all the pieces. I don't know where it ended up, but I do know it's still in my family's possession.

Nowadays I love just being able to be with my family for the holidays. We've all grown up and moved across the country, but seeing everyone make the effort to be together for this special time of year brings a smile to my face. Even as we face the challenges of raising the next generation of our family, I look forward to making new memories and even seeing what mishaps will come our way as my nephews and nieces grow up.



THE DAWN CAROL

BY ABIGAIL FALANGA

WATCHMEN! – KEEP WATCH FOR LIGHT,
WATCH ON THE WALLS OF OUR LAND.
WE LONG FOR DAYS OF LOST SIGHT,
SHADOWED BY DEATH'S DARK HAND.

“UNTO YOU THAT FEAR MY NAME
SHALL THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS ARISE.”
UNSOUGHT, THE ANSWER TO PROPHECY CAME –
AS A BABE IN A MANGER CRIES.

[REFRAIN]

REJOICE WITH GREAT JOY! GLORY BE TO GOD!
HE HAS COME TO US – WE ARE NOT ALONE.
RUN AND TELL! THE CREATOR WALKS OUR LOT;
RELIT THE DAWN AND REMADE US HIS OWN!

DARKNESS! – FLEE THE COMING LIGHT!
FROM THE HEIGHTS OF THE HEAVENS
ETERNITY INCARNATE TAKES FLIGHT;
FOR UNTO US A SON IS GIVEN!

NO LONGER OPPRESSED BY CURSE AND FEAR;
EVEN TO DEATH, HOPE WILL IN US DWELL.
THROUGH EVERY FIRE HE WILL BE NEAR:
GOD WITH US – EMMANUEL.

WATCHMEN! – SEE THE HORIZON CLEAR.
LIGHT DAWNS FROM BEYOND BLACK SIN!
WISDOM, POWER, GLORY DRAW NEAR,
TO BANISH THE DARKNESS OF MEN.

“TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST ALL GLORY BE!”
LIFT UP YOUR VOICES AND SING!
“FOR NOW THE LIGHT OF PEACE WE SEE
RISE WITH HEALING IN HIS WINGS!”

Finding Certainty in an Uncertain World

By Benjamin Fearn

As I write this, it's hard to find the correct balance. Do you be cynical but prepared for when disappointment happens, or do you look forward to things 'getting better' and having your hopes dashed? This has been the case for most of us throughout the pandemic. Christmas 2020 felt like the long, slow, painful return to inevitable restrictions.

Here in the UK, there wasn't a semblance of normality from January 2021 until mid-April - where non-essential shops were allowed to reopen and outdoor hospitality was allowed. Given the sacrifices made by so many and the hardships suffered mentally and physically, it has been a massive temptation to look ahead to a vastly improved Christmas this year. There's no doubt we're in a better position this Christmas thanks to the heroic vaccination efforts, but nevertheless the vast spread of the Omicron Covid variant and rising infection rates has meant that this has been the second Christmas in a row where we've all anxiously checked the news for the 'L' word: lockdown.

I've sympathised with people urging us to 'switch off the news' and try to focus on ourselves, but that's so hard at a time of global crisis. In my professional life it's also difficult to switch off the news given that I'm a journalist! At times like this it's tempting (and I'm guilty of this) to wish part of our lives away; to fast-forward a few months to warmer weather and (hopefully) lower Covid infection rates. It's important to look to the future, but the here and now is vital as well. Focusing on our loved ones and those we hold dear. Solidarity and friendship.

Remembering those we've lost. These are all key Christmas themes - whether secular or religious. I hope you can all find some time of joy and happiness this Christmas, even as we battle on through this awful pandemic. Treasure those little mercies and bits of good news that we cling to. As I finish, I'll leave you with a passage from Matthew 11: 28-30, and the hope that sustains us as Christians: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The House of Christmas

By G.K. Chesterton

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.

The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.

Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honor and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the Yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam,
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;

We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost – how long ago!

In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.
This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.
To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.



Christmas Reflection 2021

By Elizabeth Roper

This Christmas time my reflection is on the many crises in the world and the opportunity we are given to enact our spiritual callings and apply their ways of being to how we respond to crises.

My personal callings grew from a lifetime exploring places, tales and traditions in my native West Country. While plunging deep into the stories of Glastonbury as a teenager I spent much time experiencing the energetic 'hug' of Chalice Well and Glastonbury Tor. Here I discovered the writings of Wellesley Tudor Pole - spiritual writer and supporter of the Chalice Well Trust. One line stayed with me and I tucked it away to be released in its full glory later on. 'Love is God'.

Long story short: girl spends years exploring her spirituality; becomes pagan, then Buddhist and then - in the depths of a health crises feels a deeper presence; a shaft of pure love and light surrounding her in her hospital room and she returns to the Methodist congregation of her childhood because it feels like nothing else except the Christ she had come to expect.

Fast forward to today and my reflection for you is not an unrehearsed one - it is the truth at the heart of the Christian faith that I recognise; that a life lived through a lens of love is all we have in the face of darkness.

We are afraid to turn on the news. A new crisis is manifesting in the shape of the unknown virus variant; millions in the Western world are on the brink of true poverty; millions around the world are without a home as they flee climate related disaster or the horrific result of human conflict. What can we do in the face of such unending despair?

We can embody the courage of Jesus Christ is what we can do. We can flip the tables and step out of our comfort zones. We can be warriors for justice from our comfy armchairs and from the strength at the depths of our souls.

Fr. Richard Rohr, the contemplative and progressive Christian teacher who founded the Centre for Action and Contemplation reminds us, that to live in 'sin' is to live in suffering. In choosing to live close to God and close to the life that Jesus embodied, we step out of sin. Sin may not be an evil thing - but just a thing that distracts us from God - shopping; too much entertainment; too much human chaos.

The time we spend with God is the time we spend contemplating our love for the world. Recently I was reminded of this by considering the love I feel for my pets. The little paws of my cat and small scaly legs of my tortoise strike me as so expressive of God's love. I'm reminded in the dark of the December night in this Northern Hemisphere that indeed: God is Love and Love is God.

Let's dig deep this Christmas and put ourselves out there. Let's be warriors – albeit armchair ones – but let's speak out publicly of our disgust at how our fellow humans are having to live. There is transformation in dealing with these issues head on. As Fr. Richard says:

“Great love and great suffering bring us back to God, and I believe this is how Jesus himself walked humanity back to God. It is not just a path of resurrection rewards but a path that now includes death and woundedness.”

Campaign; email; fundraise, give if you can. Petition, speak out on social media. Read, read, read – understand the situations we are surrounded with – look at all viewpoints – challenge your assumptions. Put your life in context; because their suffering is our suffering. May YOUR gift to the world this Christmas be the light of your own love and the power of seeking justice and truth. For me, in Jesus' name. Amen.



Annunciation

By Jalal-al-din Rumi

The Holy Spirit said to Mary:
Oh, the exemplar of charity!
Don't fear me!

I am the trusty one sent by the Divine.
Don't hide yourself from me.
I am your dignity and honor!
Don't hide yourself from me,
I am your comfort and confidant.

As the Holy Spirit uttered these words
The rays of pure light sprang from his lips
And shone upon the stars of the sky.

The Holy Spirit continued:
Oh Mary, how can you escape
from my presence to non-existence?
I am the king of non-existence
and I possess all of knowledge.

My very foundation and my seat is non-existence.
What is present before you is only an image of me.
Oh Mary! Look at me. I am an image hard to come by
I am the crescent you see up in the sky
I am the image within your heart.

**When such image as this one settles in your heart
Wherever you go, it is within you.
This is not the delusion a false daylight
That appears and disappears before the morning.
I am the genuine light at dawn
And the darkness of night never
gathers around my daylight.**



Muslim Thoughts on Jesus



Editor's Note: While Muslims do not celebrate Christmas, and differ with Christians on major points of theology regarding the nature and mission of Christ, they too hold a deep reverence for the figures of Jesus and Mary. To find common ground where we agree and to clarify where we disagree, F&F has conducted a survey among our Muslim readers and contributors (both Sunni & Shia) about what Jesus means to them...

Zoheir Ismail, UK: "Jesus was a gift to all of humanity, and all people gain something from the ocean of his personality. Whether it is to love one's neighbour as oneself, to see the world as but a bridge, or his example of one of God's most chosen servants, those who love God cannot help but be enraptured by Jesus. The spirit of God, the Messiah, and one of the five determined prophets is how he is referred to in Islamic literature. Born of one of the purest women to walk this earth, his beginning was blessed and his final chapter still to come. He is blessed the day he was born, the day he will die, and the day he will be raised again."

Aisha Khan, US: "I see him as a man of peace, one who brought peace, and was a pacifist yet stood for the truth. He was willing to challenge the corrupt, and brought endless love and mercy to his people, because he was sent not to fight but just to exist with the spirit of God!"

Ali Hussain, US: "Jesus, peace be upon him, is the Word of God and a spirit from Him. He re-enacts his miraculous birth through his own sacred breath. His very existence stands as a testimony to the divinely creative principle of Word to world. For me, as a Muslim, he was the brother of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him), as in a hadith the Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him) said that all Prophets are brothers from different mothers."

Anwar Majothi, UK: "Jesus is venerated in Islam as one of Allah's greatest prophets. The Qur'an describes one of his first miracles was defending the honour of Mary from his cradle when she returned to her people clutching baby Jesus, who was born out of wedlock. Jesus went on to perform numerous miracles throughout his life - all by the command of Allah. Jesus rejected materialism and lived a simple life, which greatly influenced the Sufi branch of Islam with its emphasis on asceticism."

Touseef Mohamad Khan, India: "In the long chain of guardians that the Almighty sent towards humanity to refine their thoughts towards righteous values and divine harmony, Hazrat e Isa ibn Maryam, recognized as Jesus Christ by my Christian brethren, holds a very critical status in history. Upon his miraculous declaration as the prophet of God only after a few days of his birth, marks a unique phase wherein the only surviving Abrahamic religion was professed by Jews who claimed monopoly upon the subject. Jesus for me will always mean a reiteration that downtrodden have an equal share in being servants of the Almighty."

Ashish Zed Juneja Kha, UK: "Jesus brought spirituality back to legalistic religion; some religions are largely spiritual (Christianity), and some legal (Judaism). Islam works when it combines the two."

Sabih Abbas, UK: "For me Jesus represents a Prophet of God who is a sign to all humankind of God's endless mercy. The Quran mentions Jesus, or Isa, twenty-five times. He has been mentioned as ruh min Allah ("Spirit from God"), mushia bi'l baraka ("the Messiah—someone blessed by God"), kalimah min Allah ("Word from/of God"), and rasul (Prophet-Messenger) of God. Muslims believe Jesus was a servant, teacher, and a lover of God's Word, but not that he was divine or the son of God. Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet who was given a special message—injil, or the gospel—to convey to all people. This message both confirmed what was taught in the Torah and foretold the coming of Prophet Muhammad. Thus, Jesus has a vital and unique role to play in the Muslim faith and Muslims all around the world highly respect Prophet Jesus. Muslims also believe that he will return to Earth before the Day of Judgment to restore justice and defeat the Dajjal, and that he will be accompanied by The Mahdi who is the great grandson of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh)."

Madiha Umm Zaaim, Canada: "Jesus is mentioned as Isa (pbuh) in the Quran and he's revered as one of the holy prophets of Allah. We are required to believe in his prophethood and that he (pbuh) was born to Virgin Mary. He is also known as ruh Allah (spirit of Allah) as his creation is similar to the creation of Adam as (pbuh) when Allah breathed life into him. Isa alaihis salam was given many miracles. He was saved from being crucified and was lifted to the heavens. He will be coming near the end of times as an ummati of prophet Muhammad صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ and get rid of all that's evil and set his people (nation of Christianity) straight on the message he has brought of Allah being one God and no one is partners to Him. He (Allah) is one and only and has no son or partner. I also know of a story about him and the his disciples and three loaves of bread."

Omer Farooq Saeed, Pakistan: "Jesus is an article of faith in Muslim belief. His personality is considered divinely inspired and his words are taken as a message of God. Jesus is believed to be the leader of the Muslims in his second coming and he will lead them to triumph in the whole of the world. Muslims and Christians differ on the personality of Jesus while they both utterly respect him. Muslims believe him to be a man, son of a man (woman) and a human like others, but higher in rank because of his Prophethood. The Qur'an addresses him and his mother with utmost respect and calls him the 'Word of God' and the 'Sign of God' as he was born miraculously without a father. The description of him in the Qur'an is even more precise, detailed, and to the point than in the Bible itself. This is the viewpoint of Muslims regarding the great man."

Saif Kamal, Bangladesh: "He is a Prophet, a Messenger, a Human, and the Messiah. Miraculously born without a father of the Virgin Mary/Maryam (AS), he did miracles like healing the blind, lepper, giving life to the dead through the permission of Allah (swt), knowing the secret treasures, a servant of Allah (swt) who was conspired to be killed by Israelite Jews only to be saved by Allah (swt) through the Angels and being taken up, gonna come back before the hour to kill the Anti-christ (Al-Masih Ad-Dajjal) and be a just ruler, die a normal death and being put in the grave beside prophet Muhammad (sm)."

Afzal Hussain, UK: "Jesus was divinely pious and humble leader whose righteous adherents remained loyal hundreds of years later even travelling far and wide seeking only the truth."

Burhan Uddin, Pakistan: "Jesus is the Messenger of God dearest to me after Syedna Muhammad Sal-Allah u alaih wasallam. As for the religious perspective the Quran tells us that Jesus is Kalimatullah - "Word of God" (Logos)."

Syed Abbas Haider Zaidi, Pakistan: "Jesus, or Esa as referred to in the Quran and other Islamic texts, is one of the most beloved people of God. Indeed, he was the best of his time and among the best ones to walk on this Earth. Regarded as one of the five great prophets in Islam, along with Moses, Abraham, Noah and Muhammad, we see him as the brother of our Prophet Muhammad. He came to Earth through Lady Maryam, one of the greatest ladies of history. God has revealed an entire chapter of the Quran in her name. The followers of Jesus are dear to the Muslims too, except to the extremist ones. In the Battle of Karbala, when so-called Muslims ditched their Prophet's grandson, Husayn, two Christian men named John and Wahab were among those who sacrificed their lives for him. Indeed, Jesus was a gift to the mankind whom our Prophet considered his brother."

Ali Raza Saleem, Pakistansan: "Jesus was the son of virgin Mary, with his spirit and body both created from the direct Amr (Word) of God, which is akin to bringing forth existence from either nothingness (like the creation of the universe) or by defying the empirical laws of existing world (like in miracles). God often calls the creations of Alam e Amr 'His', like calling Jesus His Spirit, as he calls Adam, and His Word (Kalima). The temporal implementation (creation of Jesus in flesh) of the a-temporal Word was 'carried' by God through the Holy Spirit (Angel Gibrael), who also breathed Jesus's Spirit into the womb of Virgin Mary. Since Jesus's body is 'different', though still made of flesh, and he came from the womb of a profoundly asthetic, spiritual woman, he had lofty, pure Nafs (Self). He was innately devoted towards God in the 'likeness' of angelic devotion, free from typical human vices. Just like accomplished Saints, who remind people of God. This is why some people confused him with God. Jesus will return in his second coming, as the follower of Prophet Muhammad, and in alliance with Mehdi, he will kill the Dajjal (Anti-Christ). He will take role of leadership of Believers and Earth will see peace. He would marry, have children and live until his natural death."

Mohammed Omer, Pakistan: "When I think of Jesus (on him be peace), an image of a powerful and pure light comes to mind. He was born of Mary (on her be peace), pure, virgin and devoted to God. Just like his mother, he was greatly tested with heavy trials, so was Jesus (on him be peace). He was sent as a last Prophet to the Israelites and to teach them spirituality and gnosis which they had ignored for a long time, turning their hearts hard as stones. One of his main missions was also to give glad tidings - the good news - of the coming of the last and final Prophet to all mankind, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him). I believe, as most Muslims do, that Jesus (peace be upon him) will come back again to this world near the end of times. He will help the world to get rid of the Anti-Christ, get married and will 'die' and get buried in Medinah beside the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him). To me personally, he also seems to me to be very much like 'Ali and Husayn (upon them be peace) in how he was treated by people around him. He seems to have had the same fate as 'Ali, as 'Ali (upon him be peace) was hated by some people and some people raised him to the point of worshipping him. In the end, I do not consider myself worthy of writing anything about Jesus (upon him be peace) because my mind cannot encompass his reality, light and greatness with which God blessed him from His infinite bounty and grace."



Vision of the Nativity

By St. Brigid of Sweden

When I was present by the manger of the Lord in Bethlehem I beheld a Virgin of extreme beauty wrapped in a white mantle and a delicate tunic through which I perceived her virginal body. With her was an old man of great honesty and they had with them an ox and ass. These entered the cave and the man having tied them to the manger went out and brought in to the Virgin a lighted candle which having done he again went outside so as not to be present at the birth.

Then the Virgin pulled off the shoes from her feet, drew off the white mantle that enveloped her, removed the veil from her head laying it beside her, thus remaining only in her tunic with her beautiful golden hair falling loosely over her shoulders. Then she produced two small linen cloths, and two woolen ones of exquisite purity and fineness which she had brought to wrap round the Child to be born, and two other small cloths to cover His head, and these too she put beside her.

When all was thus prepared the Virgin knelt with great veneration in an attitude of prayer; her back was to the manger, her face uplifted to heaven and turned toward the East. Then, her hands extended and her eyes fixed on the sky, she stood as in an ecstasy, lost in contemplation, in a rapture of divine sweetness.

And while she stood thus in prayer, I saw the Child in her womb move; suddenly in a moment she gave birth to her own Son from whom radiated such ineffable light and splendor that the sun was not comparable to it while the divine light totally annihilated the material light of St. Joseph's candle. So sudden and instantaneous was this birth that I could neither discover nor discern by what means it had occurred.

All of a sudden, I saw the glorious Infant lying on the ground naked and shining, His body pure from any soil or impurity. Then I heard the singing of the angels of miraculous sweetness and beauty. When the Virgin felt she had borne her Child immediately she worshipped Him, her hands clasped in honor and reverence saying: 'Be welcome my God, my Lord, my Son.'

Then, as the Child was whining and trembling from the cold and hardness of the floor where He was lying, He stretched out His arms imploring her to raise Him to the warmth of her maternal love. So His Mother took Him in her arms, pressed Him to her breast and cheek, and warmed Him with great joy and tender compassion. She then sat down on the ground laying the Child on her lap and at once began to bestow on Him much care tying up

His small body, His legs and arms in long cloths, and enveloped His head in the linen garments, and when this was done the old man entered, and prostrating himself on the floor he wept for joy. And in no way was the Virgin changed by giving birth, the color of her face remained the same nor did her strength decline. She and Joseph put the Child in the manger, and worshipped Him on their knees with immense joy until the arrival of the Kings who recognized the Son from the likeness to His Mother.



Meditation on a Eucharistic Christmas Carol

By S. Kirk Pierzchala

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” has long been a favorite hymn of mine. This is partly because my mother loved it, so from an early age I was exposed to the simple, solemn grandeur of both the words and the melancholic tune. As I grew older and had a better comprehension of the lyrics, they continued to evoke a response that went straight to my heart and soul—perhaps because I've always had a weakness for the mysterious, exotic tones of anything written in a minor key.

This unusual hymn gained popularity as a Christmas carol after composer Ralph Vaughn Williams set the text to the French carol “Picardy” in 1906. But the lyrics are far older than that: it's from the ancient Liturgy of St. James, dating from the 300's, so it is actually part of the Catholic Mass. This means both the force and the simplicity of the words are not an accident. It is a powerful bit of theology, intended to focus the worshipper's attention on the altar in anticipation of the sacrifice, the part of the ritual where Catholics and Orthodox Christians believe their offering of bread and wine truly becomes the Body and Blood of Christ.

But what does a Christmas carol have to do with the dogma of Transubstantiation? On the other hand, how could any sincere consideration of the Word becoming flesh at least not skirt near the heart of that admittedly difficult and misunderstood teaching? To see these connections, take a closer look at the exquisite words of this song, as they offer a multi-layered glimpse into different aspects of the mystery of the Incarnation.

The first stanza directs our attention to the altar, but the mind's eye is also led to meditate on the moment Mary agreed to the angel's message, that universe-shaking instant when the Word descended from Its glorious throne in Heaven to become flesh within the Virgin's womb, nine months before Christmas:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly-minded,
For with blessing in His hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

The next part makes a more direct connection between Christ's earthly, human birth from Mary, and His enfleshment in the hands of the priest at the altar, while also reminding us of the meaning of the word Bethlehem (House of Bread):

**King of kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth He stood,
Lord of lords, in human vesture,
In the body and the blood;
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heav'nly food**

**In the third part, even as we join our prayers with those
of the heavenly host, we can also envision the night skies
over Bethlehem ablaze with angelic choirs:**

**Rank on rank the host of heaven
Spreads its vanguard on the way,
As the Light of light descendeth
From the realms of endless day,
That the pow'rs of hell may vanish
As the darkness clears away**

**Finally, earthly time itself seems to stop, as for a
moment we glimpse the praise and glory of the ongoing,
eternal Beatific Vision:**

**At His feet the six-winged seraph,
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to the presence,
As with ceaseless voice they cry:
“Alleluia, Alleluia,
Alleluia, Lord Most High!”**

These stanzas express three of the most important concepts in Christianity: the mystery of Eternity entering into time at the Incarnation, our joy at His revelation at Christmas, and His becoming flesh again on the altar.

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” is a remarkable hymn for both its simplicity, versatility and beauty, and whether or not it's sung during your Christmas service this season, it is well worthwhile to listen to and ponder at any time of year.



Mary's Lullaby

By George MacDonald

Babe Jesus lay in Mary's lap,
The sun shone in his hair;
And this was how she saw, mayhap,
The crown already there.

For she sang: "Sleep on, my little king;
Bad Herod dares not come;
Before thee sleeping, holy thing,
The wild winds would be dumb."

"I kiss thy hands, I kiss thy feet,
My child, so long desired;
Thy hands will never be soiled, my sweet;
Thy feet will never be tired."

"For thou art the king of men, my son;
Thy crown I see it plain!
And men shall worship thee, every one,
And cry, Glory! Amen!"

Babe Jesus he opened his eyes wide—
At Mary looked her lord.
Mother Mary stinted her song and sighed;
Babe Jesus said never a word.



Grim was the world and grey last night:
The moon and stars were fled,
The hall was dark without song or light,
The fires were fallen dead.
The wind in the trees was like to the sea,
And over the mountains' teeth
It whistled bitter-cold and free,
As a sword leapt from its sheath.

The lord of snows upreared his head;
His mantle long and pale
Upon the bitter blast was spread
And hung o'er hill and dale.
The world was blind, the boughs were bent,
All ways and paths were wild:
Then the veil of cloud apart was rent,
And here was born a Child.

The ancient dome of heaven sheer
Was pricked with distant light;
A star came shining white and clear
Alone above the night.
In the dale of dark in that hour of birth
One voice on a sudden sang:
Then all the bells in Heaven and Earth
Together at midnight rang.

Mary sang in this world below:
They heard her song arise
O'er mist and over mountain snow
To the walls of Paradise,
And the tongue of many bells was stirred
in Heaven's towers to ring
When the voice of mortal maid was heard,
That was mother of Heaven's King.

Glad is the world and fair this night
With stars about its head,
And the hall is filled with laughter and light,
And fires are burning red.
The bells of Paradise now ring
With bells of Christendom,
And Gloria, Gloria we will sing
That God on earth is come.

Noel

BY JRR TOLKIEN

Let us Envision: A Christmas Reflection on St. Joseph

By The Traveling Troubadour

Let us envision... some twenty centuries ago in Nazareth, a humble, chaste, and just man named Joseph the Carpenter received a providential knock on his destiny's door. He was being chosen for the most dignified divine assignment that was ever given to a mere mortal man since time immemorial. This incomprehensible mission was far beyond the bounds of earthly prominence and would be fulfilled by his betrothal to the fairest of all maidens that ever existed.

Let us envision... The Blessed Ever Virgin Mary, who was the only purely virtuous and sinless human soul designed by the Creator, gracing the matrimonial altar with an angelic radiance that transcended the boundaries of beauty and embodied loveliness itself. Standing side by side, she gently places her petite feminine hand upon his, which was rough-hewn and manly. She fixes her trusting eyes upon his steady gaze of devotion as they recite their perpetual vows to faithfully seal their pledge of limitless love, honor, and respect till death do they part.

Let us envision... the Angel Gabriel's appearance and annunciation, as he presented her with the supreme heavenly invitation to be the tabernacle of the God-Man. She reverently responded with her fiat: "I am the Lord's handmaid of the Lord; let it be done unto me according to Thy word". Soon thereafter her, beloved spouse was visited by an angel in a dream revealing and reaffirming the stunning reality that she was indeed carrying the precious seed of the Holy Spirit within her.

Let us envision... the sheer magnitude of that tremendous moment, which would consummate a new covenant through the miraculous mystery of the Incarnation of the Savior of all mankind. When Joseph learned of it, his mind must have been in a perplexed whirlwind, taking him in countless directions, as he tried in vain to make sense of something so extraordinary that he could not hope to comprehend it with anything but faith. The sheer responsibility was only to increase.

Let us envision... the very vulnerable expectant couple as they courageously embarked with blind faith in the face of an arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. They were compelled to abide by the law of the land and register for the Roman census of Judea. Joseph had to apply prudential judgement in his decision to take Mary with him in her tender maternal condition, yet would still have been weighed down by apprehension and concern.

Let us envision... her softly smiling and reassuring him she was well enough to go with him and that she did not wish to be separated from him during the rest of the time her expectancy. And so he carefully lifted his delicate bride upon their invaluable beast of burden that would carry her and the priceless treasure within her to the City of David.

Let us envision... Joseph untying the rope to the donkey, then firmly grasping it as a symbolic connection to her security as they began the greatest journey of their life. Though the heavenly offspring was still safely within her virginal womb, yet all signs were indicating that He may be born any time soon.

They could only hope and pray for Him to delay as they neared his native town after many long days. When they finally arrived after the numerous trials of the trek, the inns were filled with those returning for the census, and available were available to rest their weary heads. All they were offered was a lowly stable where the animals slept and fed.

Let us envision...them accepting these simple and humble surroundings as a blessing and a gift of hospitality, with truest gratitude and sincere humility, firmly believing that the Father above had prepared it. This was the chosen place for His Only Begotten Son to first show the brilliance of His shining face. It was to become hallowed ground in that hour of the divine delivery when The Light of the World entered earth through this wondrous birth! Let us marvel in the magnitude of this crescendo of truly unimaginable joy, surpassing all other events in the creation of the universe, happening in such a simplistic setting, and this pristine vessel, the Ever-Virgin Mary, being gilded lamp that held the flame of love itself, making her the mother of mankind's redemption.

So let us always seek the intercession of Good Saint Joseph, the guardian guide and protector of the Holy Family, for without his spiritual fortitude and devotion to his beloved bride and foster son, the Christ Child, the timeless Story of the Stable may never have come to be!



FOR THE KING ON HIS BIRTHDAY

BY LEAH FISHER

DARKNESS

ALL OF THE WORLD IS IN DARKNESS
THEY SUFFER IN ALL THEIR AFFLICTIONS
SO DROWNED OUT BY ALL THEIR ADDICTIONS
THEY FALL INTO SIN AND ARE LOST ONES
WHO ONCE WERE CALLED TO BE GOD'S SONS
THEY'VE GIVEN UP LONGING FOR RIGHT
FAR TOO EXHAUSTED TO FIGHT
THEIR RESERVES ARE GONE, THE BATTLE'S LOST
WHEN YOU COME WITH YOUR CROSS.

LIGHT

SHINE YOUR PERFECT LIGHT UPON THEM
LIKE THE BREAKING OF A NEWFOUND DAY
ILLUMINATING FOR THEM THE WAY
AS YOU CALL THEM BACK TO LIFE AND PEACE
THAT STRIVINGS EVERMORE MAY CEASE
LET ALL MEN COME FROM COUNTRIES FAR
AS THEY WONDER AT YOUR STAR
AND BRING, O KING, GIFTS FOR THE COST
WHICH YOU MUST ONE DAY PAY.

YOU WASH US WITH BLOOD AS BY WATER
NOW BY THE BEAUTY OF YOUR HEART
ALL THE LIES ARE TORN APART
SAVIOR, KINDLE FIRE, MELT THE FROST
CAUSE ALL FLESH TO HAIL YOU.

TIN SOLDIER

(AN EXCERPT OF “MERE CHRISTIANITY”)

BY C.S. LEWIS

Did you ever think, when you were a child, what fun it would be if your toys could come to life? Well, suppose you could really have brought them to life. Imagine turning a tin soldier into a real little man. It would involve turning the tin into flesh. And suppose the tin soldier did not like it. He is not interested in flesh: all he sees is that the tin is being spoilt. He thinks you are killing him. He will do everything he can to prevent you. He will not be made into a man if he can help it.

What you would have done about that tin soldier I do not know. But what God did about us was this. The Second Person in God, the Son, became human Himself: was born into the world as an actual man— a real man of a particular height, with hair of a particular colour, speaking a particular language, weighing so many stone. The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a foetus inside a Woman’s body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.

The result of this was that you now had one man who really was what all men were intended to be: one man in whom the created life, derived from His Mother, allowed itself to be completely and perfectly turned into the begotten life. The natural human creature in Him was taken up fully into the divine Son.

Thus in one instance humanity had, so to speak, arrived: had passed into the life of Christ. And because the whole difficulty for us is that the natural life has to be, in a sense, 'killed', He chose an earthly career which involved the killing of His human desires at every turn—poverty, misunderstanding from His own family, betrayal by one of His intimate friends, being jeered at and manhandled by the Police, and execution by torture. And then, after being thus killed—killed every day in a sense—the human creature in Him, because it was united to the divine Son, came to life again.

The Man in Christ rose again: not only the God. That is the whole point. For the first time we saw a real man. One tin soldier—real tin, just like the rest—had come fully and splendidly alive.

Can We Eat, Drink And Be Merry This Christmas?

**Philip Booth, Professor of Finance, Public Policy and Ethics
St. Mary's University, Twickenham**

A quick google search will reveal that Pope Francis warns us almost every year about the commercialisation of Christmas. This year, for example, he was quoted as saying: “The Christmas tree and Nativity crèche should evoke the joy and the peace of God’s love and not the selfish indulgence of consumerism and indifference”. Of course, this message is not unique to Pope Francis: almost every Christian minister warns of this danger!


Of course, Pope Francis is right. It also a narrative that fits into the virtues that he expresses in his own lifestyle. Pope Francis clearly eschews material luxuries. He does not ask us to do anything that he does not practise himself. But, of course, this does not mean we have to eliminate the commercial aspects of Christmas from our lives altogether. There is much that is material about Christmas that is important. God becomes man and joins us in our material world. He was brought presents – substantial and meaningful presents. Indeed, the material is important to Catholic Christianity more generally. At the end of time, our souls will be united with our physical bodies

An aerial night view of a city, likely London, showing a complex network of roads and bridges illuminated with lights. The scene is dominated by blue and white light trails from traffic, with some warmer lights from buildings and streetlights. The overall atmosphere is one of a bustling, modern urban environment.

And Catholic Christianity involves “feasts and seasons” to borrow the title of Joanna Bogle’s book, as well as fasts and penance. The Church has developed her calendar this way because this pattern of feasts, fasting and times of penance and celebration accords with our human nature which is given to us by God.

And the provision of material things – meals, food, presents, parties, and so on, provides large numbers of people with their livelihoods. Around 15–20 per cent of people in the UK work in leisure, catering, retail and related sectors. The problem, of course, is not the celebration of Christmas with material things. It is, precisely as the pope said this year – consumerism and indifference. The problem of indifference is easily understood by considering the poverty into which Jesus was born followed by His exile as the family became refugees. But what about consumerism?

Avoiding consumerism does not mean avoiding all material things, especially on feast days. It means ensuring that they have their proper place. In the area of Catholic social thought, Mary Hirschfeld and Andrew Yuengert have written very effectively about how we should order economic goods. Consumer goods should help us live a good, happy and fulfilled life. We need consumer goods to live in dignity. And consumer goods can help us mark feast days appropriately and ensure that those days have their proper place in the calendar.



The gifts that Jesus received were expensive. Those gifts, though, had a purpose: they involved the use of material things rightly ordered. And they brought meaning to the giver as well as to the recipient (and indeed to the whole world). Similarly, for us, the celebration of feast days, with some material trappings, can help bring meaning to Christmas. But, in Catholic social thought, those material things should never be an end in themselves otherwise we are falling for consumerism. We have finite needs: we do not become happy simply by having more consumer goods. How do we avoid consumerism?

When people criticise the commercialisation of Christmas, it can be difficult to answer the question “so, what should we do (or not do)?”. Does avoiding consumerism mean that I should buy a bit less tinsel or go to one party rather than five parties or buy an organic turkey rather than a mass-produced frozen one? These decisions do have to be taken. But it is probably better to start at the other end and insert Jesus into Christmas. When that has been done, we can then think about how the material world helps us to mark the feast becomingly so that the material things do not become ends in themselves. In other words, it is okay to welcome commerce and material things into Christmas, but they should be orientated towards the right ends. If commerce and the material things become the ends themselves or, indeed, distract us from the true meaning of Christmas, then we have fallen into, as the pope put it, commercialism.

The Ancient Yule of the Forest

By Ray E. Lipinski

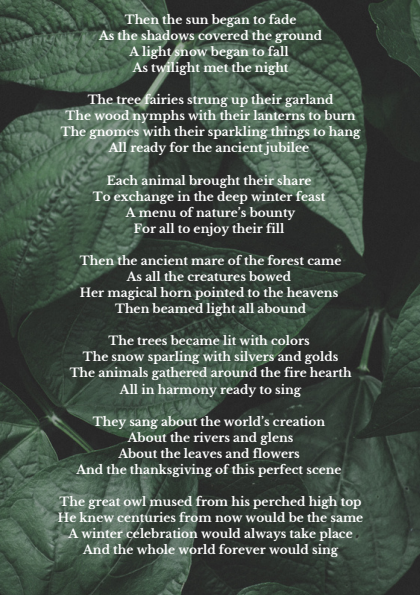
Morning twilight touched the beauty of the forest
As the cardinal flew open with song
The silence of mother nature began to awake
The needles of the trembling pines falling on the fresh, crisp snow

The fox scurrying from his lair
The hare from his den
The deer stepping out of her meadow
The pike bobbing in the icy brook

Perched on the mighty oak,
the Great White Owl called an assembly
The creatures of glade gathered far and wide
to hear what he had to say

Some earthen souls were mortal, some were not
Some were of legend and lore
Soon a medieval menagerie of Celtic wonder had gathered
And the Great Owl delivered his decree

On the shortest day of Winter
When the Earth was asleep with the moon
The forest would rejoice with celebration
As the marriage between light and dark would take place
The day was spent in merriment as woodland games were played
A gopher snowball fight
A squirrel cross country race
Glee and laughter hung in the air



Then the sun began to fade
As the shadows covered the ground
A light snow began to fall
As twilight met the night

The tree fairies strung up their garland
The wood nymphs with their lanterns to burn
The gnomes with their sparkling things to hang
All ready for the ancient jubilee

Each animal brought their share
To exchange in the deep winter feast
A menu of nature's bounty
For all to enjoy their fill

Then the ancient mare of the forest came
As all the creatures bowed
Her magical horn pointed to the heavens
Then beamed light all around

The trees became lit with colors
The snow sparkling with silvers and golds
The animals gathered around the fire hearth
All in harmony ready to sing

They sang about the world's creation
About the rivers and glens
About the leaves and flowers
And the thanksgiving of this perfect scene

The great owl mused from his perched high top
He knew centuries from now would be the same
A winter celebration would always take place
And the whole world forever would sing

“A Savior of the Savior”: A Josephite Reflection

By Sean Earner

“To give life to someone is the greatest of all gifts. To save a life is the next. Who gave life to Jesus? It was Mary. Who saved his life? It was Joseph. Ask St. Paul who persecuted him. Ask St. Peter who denied him. Ask all the saints who put him to death. But if we ask, ‘Who saved his life?’ Be silent patriarchs, be silent prophets, be silent apostles, confessors, and martyrs. Let St. Joseph speak, for this honor is his alone; he alone is the savior of his Savior (Catholic Women in Business 2020).”

—Blessed William Joseph Chaminade

Such are the eloquent words one witness to St. Joseph, the tree of Jesse on which the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets laid His head to rest. Around each saint circles a litany of names. It is a verbal extravagance by which love is exchanged between Celestial realms and the earth, a ladder by which angels ascend and descend in endless procession. We delight in adding ever more to their honors of our brothers and sisters of Heaven. Above all we love to chant every name of Mary. But Joseph, the silent member of the Holy Family, has gained his share of a discourse of praise that makes him known and enables those who use it. One title stands out from the centuries accumulated list of titles: Savior of the Savior. To say it almost seems blasphemous in its audacity. But let us reflect on the presentation of Joseph in the Gospels. For Joseph did save Christ in threefold ways - from public shame by his courtesy, from the vulnerability of childhood, and from the oppression of earthly power. And in this manner, he points to how we can participate in this act of salvation.

Joseph saved Christ through his matchless discretion. He did not disown Jesus as a bastard product of adultery. He preferred to divorce Mary quietly so as to minimize the scandal. But, realizing that a mystery greater than himself was taking place, he took the Virgin Mother to be his spouse. In both the attempted refusal and the willing deed, Joseph sought to protect the reputation of Mary and by extension of her child. And by doing this, in the eyes of the world, he was a cuckold fool. This was a role that he played for the rest of his life. The insinuations of dishonor never deterred him. Joseph gave the protection of his name to the Immaculate Conception and the Incarnate Word. A seemingly small thing in comparison to such persons, but of immense value in the economy of salvation.

Joseph guarded Jesus in his infant and childlike helplessness. He walked with Him from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He was present for the Christ child at His entrance to the world as Mary's child. When Christ was presented at the Temple where His first blood was shed, Joseph stood by. No doubt he was there when Christ uttered his first words and took his first steps. He guided him as he learned the plane and the lathe of a carpenter, as well as the Law, the Prophets, and the prayers of the Jewish people. He guided Jesus and rescued Him from the oppression of the evil that dwells in the high places. The flight into Egypt, the prophetic paradox that Christ's mission was spared from being snuffed out in its infancy by going out of the land of Israel into the alien peoples of the Gentiles, was made dependent on the action of Joseph. Even leaving aside Matthew's account of the escape from King Herod, we can infer Joseph helped Jesus survive a world full of injustice and oppression in a more subtle way. We know that "Christ went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to [his parents]" and that "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." Thus we know that he was prepared in wisdom for His public ministry through His submission to His father and mother. And from this we can conceive that Christ gained His own later displayed inner emancipation from the powers of both the Jews and the Gentiles from the man who was publicly acknowledged as His progenitor. The little house at Nazareth prepared the mind of the man who would not suffer the impositions of the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees, and who would not deign to speak like a slave in front of Pilate

The Josephite title of "Savior of the Savior" brings to the foreground how we, in our humble way, are instrumental in the rescue of the world from itself. Part of the scandal of the Incarnation is that God has made His plan dependent on the frailty of ordinary men and women. We, by our sense of decorum and decency, can prevent those who are vulnerable whether by their own sins or by the hasty judgment of others from being swept aside into the outer darkness of social death and invisibility. And when we do that, we are caring for Christ Himself, who chose to be born with something of the taint of scandal. When we use our strength and voice to care for those who weak and silent in our own little circle, when we act like careful mothers and fathers to the stumbling in our midst, we honor the the One who chose to come into a definite place, to a definite time, to a definite household, and to a definite suffering. Finally, when we work to thwart the evils of exploitation, tyranny, and persecution, even in little and humble ways, we make possible the abiding of God in creation. We act like a parent to the Christ that elected to be crucified by the allied kings of this world for the redemption of all.

The modern age thinks it is clever in finding the sacred in the mundane and not in mighty miracles. Yet the partial truth of this aversion to locating faith in wonders is already contained in the now ancient devotion to Joseph, a man for whom all the acts of his life were of the natural kind. He lived among living testaments of the living God. Yet he is adored and loved by all in the universal Church above hosts of saints that went about their duties with more supernatural signs and fanfare. By being an ordinary but just man, he saved the Logos so that the Logos could save all. Heaven was rescued from being merely Heavenly by a man who knew how to listen and act with love.

What was said in a spirit of atheistical aesthetic brazen by Wagner can be said by the faithful in a truer sense of Joseph and all those who follow after him:

Höchsten Heiles Wunder!

Erlösung dem Erlöser!

Supreme miracle of salvation!

Redemption to the Redeemer!

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The History of Light

By Regan King

**In the beginning God created light
The brightness that overtakes all darkness
The agent of sight, a force of might
With the words "let there be"
In the Universe began a beautiful symphony
Sun, moon, and stars a part all play
In what we shall call the history of light**

**Before the beginning and as forevermore, God dwelt in light
Above all angels and power is He
The giver of life through light to all
Angels and man sustained by His presence
No glory of His can one transcend
Forever in infamy Lucifer tried
God's glory to gain for self to reign
Foolhardy was he though dwelling in light
Blinded by lust to his frailty in might
From heaven he fell with his angels so bright
No threat could he pose to God's glory in light**

**From the beginning God gave us light
Both day and night to guide our way
And this goes on from day to day
In life, that said, a force has crept
Steered by the devil who lives to deceive
Mankind led astray, God's light we did leave
With reckless abandon, this darkness embraced
And sinned have we all God's image defaced
Deserving of death, destroyed we our lives,
Now living in fear and guilty of much
A price must be paid for our cacophony away from light.**

Through all history God's reminded us of light
In lights that surround in sky above,
In lights that abound on earth around
In temple and home, by candle or lamp
All can remind of his majesty bright
With light the darkness is pierced wherever it be
No room with a candle can darkness be king
No night in this life will the make the stars cease to gleam
No day of despair kill the sun and its beams.
From Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses to David and Solomon, and Zerubabel too
In days of sin, oppression, and loss
From judges to Maccabeus lights burned bright
All pointing to the mystery who is The Light of the World.

Then in history came the fullness of time, God was made flesh - light to the world
Into our darkness Immanuel came,
Born as a man, Jesus Christ came to save.
A light to reveal God's gracious free gift
To all who believe and repent of their sin
This Christ healed the sick, the deaf and the blind,
And raised he the dead that some might believe.
Holy he was and great things he did,
Showing the way that man can be saved.
Though King of the Jews, rejected they him,
Arrested and beaten and nailed to a cross,
The Lord of all died and light seemed to be lost.
Darkness had won, the Devil was king, Jesus had died, and no one was free
Perhaps this was thought on that day in the dark
When the sun hid its light and the Son breathed His last.
His body was taken and laid in a tomb.
Tears and much fear kept some disciples away.
The events of those days saw their hope fade away
For it was quite clear The Light had been slain.

**But how can it be at this moment in time
That we sit here and talk of the Light who did die?
The story is special, the history is real,
The Christ really died and that we claim still.
But death on its own is not special in life,
All men will die, that's part of sin's price.
What's special is this, that though Jesus died,
On the third day he rose and remains he alive.
The light had to die so that we may now live,
Free from our sin, with no fear of hell.
The story is written and read it you must
So that you can believe and in Christ now place trust.
Darkness is real, and see it we must,
With much harm and hurt on this Earth made of dust
Yet the history of light doesn't end here,
This Earth will be ended then all will be mended
A new world created, where darkness is not,
All victory crowning the Christ who is light.**



The Hidden Life

By Warren Herman

A guiding star for travelers,
was herald of his birth
the shepherds quaked within their fields
to hear the angels' mirth,
yet all of them in time did find
a hidden family,
and in the hearts of those,
I deem,
was greatest mystery

How was he born,
who birthed the world;
in poverty or wealth?
how could he die,
who slew all death,
and gave the sick their health?

We see the way,
marked out by him,
who blazed the only trail,
where fullness of the victory
is found when we still fail

For can we guess
the worth of lives
lived short upon the Earth?
if measured by the
deeds we've done,
then what could be their worth?

Rule an empire?
it shall fade,
to dust or into sand,
like ancient Babel's monument,
what's left of it to stand?

For fame and fortunes
come and go,
for what then shall we strive?
what good is health or family,
if none be left alive?

But fear not
and have courage, friend,
the small becomes the great,
though small be deeds
done day to day,
yet great shall be their weight

For though all things
shall pass away,
yet still, we all shall rise,
and quiet lives
lived in his love
will win the only prize

for is there any on the Earth,
who did a deed that's great?
even the Lord himself did seem,
to share our sorry fate

For what befell,
the Lord of all
who hung upon the tree?
it seemed that all was lost for him
when he saved you and me!

Though Far and wide
his fame has grown,
and so, we now forget,
his torturous death
Did not at first

Appear to make us blessed

And yet we see the
years roll by,
after stone was rolled away,
the empty tomb,
has filled our hearts
and gives a place to stay

For small we are
and shall remain,
what good then are our lives?
what meaning,
and what legacy
are found in our short times?

There is the single privilege
to walk this world with him,
in him to do the daily works,
in him be cleansed of sin.

For in him who
was born so poor, and died almost alone,
we find homes for our sufferings,
a hope that we may own
for in him, and within his love,
a small life is not small,
the simple stands in dignity,
the poor in richest hall,
the fruitless striving bears much fruit,
the barren life does bloom,
the child takes the battlefield,

from the sickbed in her room.
for little flowers we may be,
but in him roots go deep,
in him retrieve your dignity,
and then you shall not weep

For the author of our very lives,
let his own youth be forgot,
except his death and ministry,
much is remembered not.
if He himself who knows all
things,
thus, deigned to be unknown,
why then O! Dear Mortal why?
do you persist to groan?

What then is it to you my friend,
if your life is forgot?
if every task shall fruitless be,
before you're left to rot?
for if you've lived
the life you've lived,
and lived it in his sight,
the dark of thy obscurity,
shall be as endless light.

And so, the call
that calls to you must
call you home as well,
unto the home in Bethlehem,
In which his Family dwells,

So, see the glorious hidden lives
which they lived with our Lord
your life like theirs
shall shine above
if through it, he's adored!

The Strange Gift

By Michael Haldas

It's a special gift she told me.
Make sure you treat it with great care.

Endure it with love patiently.
Most people will not understand.
You'll feel like you're going nowhere,
like you're cycling endlessly
Living between hope and despair;
but holding a soul in your hand

I hung up the phone angrily,
and I walked to the other room.
Her words echoed repeatedly.
How could anyone understand?
A gift! This was more like doom.

It bordered on insanity.
I paced and then started to fume,
yet I had to meet this demand.

Gifts were for Christmas Day morning,
birthdays and special occasions.

From the one you are adoring,
presents that make hearts feel light;
not this type of an invasion;
that made you feel more like mourning.
Despite her heartfelt persuasion,
this gift just couldn't be all right.

I walked outside in frustration,
wanting to forget her strange words.

Fuming in deep consternation,
when gentle breeze suddenly blew.
A recollection long deferred,
carrying deep revelation;
recalling memory interred,
with sudden clarity I knew.

We spoke only hours ago,
but soon after came his demise
Leaving the world without bother,
left us without saying goodbyes.
Causing deep grief that would follow.

One unusually hot spring day,
We finally cleaned the house out.
Exhausted in every way,
a cold wind blew in from the outside.
It erased my pain and my doubt.
Without words I became okay.
I knew what the Wind was about.
My grief now began to subside.

The Spirit was gracing that breeze.
It so refreshed my burdened soul.
Beyond just a strong sense of ease,
it transformed my great suffering
The wounds in my heart became whole.
Grateful I prayed thanks from my knees.
And for months I would extol,
the truth I was discovering

But from my mind truth gets driven,
because I too often forget
The grace in life I've been given,
that I fail to appreciate
Realization brings deep regret.
I wish I had better striven,
and not be angry when beset
When things make my life deviate.

Now this burden was upon me,
deep suffering of another
I thought this was all behind me.
How much more pain could I take?
To avoid it were my druthers,
and I struggled internally

seek happiness said all the others.
A deeper choice I had to make.

This special gift of suffering,
yields a capacity to love
Difficult and so puzzling.
Pushes you to a painful place.
Beyond what your capable of.

The process gives a great humbling,
that can only come from above
Gifting supernatural grace.

Accepting the gift looked so strange,
to many who just didn't know
That the world likes to rearrange,
the truth to preserve its blindness.
We can deeply wish it weren't so.
Others can think we're deranged,
but the truth is it makes us grow.
Selfishness yielding to kindness.

Suffering brought out my best trait,
when I had little to offer
Always wishing it would abate,
by grace I was illumined
Though some played the role of scoffer,
thinking I was going to break.
Through grace I had more to proffer,
and it would make me more human.

Suffering is a cross to bear.
It's the strangest gift we receive.
It enables others to share,
from their soul's deepest reservoir.
Though we may want a reprieve.
Deep down we become so aware.
It is not something we should grieve.
We become better than we are.

Christmas Tears

By Avellina Balestri

Christmas is a time of tears,
A joyful melancholy,
A dazzling of midnight dawn
A glint of darkest glory.
The ribbons are of crimson hue,
And tinsel, silver-strung
Wrapped round the stumbling Christ,
With poinsettias in His path
Each Station, bleeding beauty,
Drives stakes through time and space,
Dripping gore and spittle,
Kissed by Winter's star
And here, we stand, the faithful
With the Lady of the Night
Who birth's the blazing Son,
And finds her heart consumed.
The world is but a hazel nut,
Held in the hand divine,
Yet beasts will warm eternity
Fresh-swaddled in the straw.

Wooden frames will cradle Him;
Mother's arms will comfort Him,
Now, and then --
Oh, oh, must we think of then?
It is too much, too much!
Lady, Lady, marvel deep
On what has come through thee!
Lady, Lady, we will weep
For what will pierce through thee!
But we cannot turn back...
The seed is in the ground now,
To perish and be raised
And as your soul is stricken,
The wound will glow with grace.
It will pour down upon us,
This second birthing blood,
For hearts entwined must suffer,
Even unto Death.
Now, look upon the Shepherds
Who kneel beside the Kings,
While Angels sing of this full trough
And that empty tomb.



The Real Meaning of Our Christmas Traditions

By Fr. Gerard Hatton

When thinking of an English Christmas, there are some quintessential food items that people here cannot live without, such as Brussels sprouts and sauce made out of stale bread (it's nicer than it sounds)! But nothing here in Merry England marks this festive season like the Mince Pie. I even hear rumours that the mincemeat pie was becoming popular in America until health concerns dissuaded people. Paul Hollywood would do well to take note of that buttery, crumbly pastry filled with spiced fruits and nuts and a good measure of alcohol without a soggy bottom. Some people hate mince pies, but for those who love them, nearly 800 million of them are sold each year for their consumption, not to mention the home-baked wonders.

But did you know that the humble mincemeat pie has a connection with our Faith? With England being a Catholic country before the Reformation, these Christmas mince pies were made in an oblong form, representing the manger in which Christ was born. Sometimes a little figure of the infant Jesus was placed in a slight depression in the crust. Thus, the pie was served as an object of devotion as well as part of the Christmas feast. That's why the Puritans claimed that the custom of eating Christmas pies was "an abomination, a cause of idolatry and superstition, and a popish observance."

Consequently, it was condemned at the same time as the Puritans condemned Christmas itself. Needless to say, the condemnation didn't last long, and the mince pie still has pride of place. It's a little story that we can all use to put Christ back into Christmas. The simplest of things can teach the faith, like a mince pie.

A simple image can explain profound truth, as I recently found a unique image of the Holy Family through the connection of each person of the Holy Family which should not only be with us for Christmas, but through our life. The image is of a donkey and strapped onto it a Tabernacle. The painting is clear that the Blessed Virgin Mary, as the first Tabernacle with her womb, which held Our Saviour Jesus Christ who is the Most Blessed Sacrament within, and St Joseph protecting them both is the Tabernacle Veil. Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem was nothing unusual or even spectacular, as everyone else who was doing the same. The life they had was not different to others, yet their outlook was totally different as they were in perfect union with the Will of God the Father, bearing His Son not only the Light of the World, but our only Hope.

A blessed Christmas to you all in Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!



The Archbishop Preaches in the Cathedral on Christmas Morning, 1170

(And Excerpt of "Murder in the Cathedral")

By T.S. Eliot

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."
The fourteenth verse of the second chapter of the Gospel according to Saint
Luke. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Dear children of God, my sermon this morning will be a very short one. I
wish only that you should ponder and meditate on the deep meaning and
mystery of our masses of Christmas Day. For whenever Mass is said, we re-
enact the Passion and Death of Our Lord; and on this Christmas Day we do
this in celebration of His Birth. So that at the same moment we rejoice in
His coming for the salvation of men, and offer again to God His Body and
Blood in sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.

It was in this same night that has just passed, that a multitude of the
heavenly host appeared before the shepherds at Bethlehem, saying, "Glory
to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men"; at this
same time of all the year that we celebrate at once the Birth of Our Lord
and His Passion and Death upon the Cross. Beloved, as the World sees, this
is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the World will both mourn and
rejoice at once and for the same reason? For either joy will be overcome by
mourning or mourning will be cast out by joy; so that it is only in these our
Christian mysteries that we can rejoice and mourn at once for the same
reason.

But think for a while on the meaning of this word "peace." Does it seem strange to you that the angels should have announced Peace, when ceaselessly the world has been stricken with War and the fear of War? Does it seem to you that the angelic voices were mistaken, and that the promise was a disappointment and a cheat?

Reflect now, how Our Lord Himself spoke of Peace. He said to His disciples: "My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you." Did He mean peace as we think of it: the kingdom of England at peace with its neighbours, the barons at peace with the King, the householder counting over his peaceful gains, the swept hearth, his best wine for a friend at the table, his wife singing to the children? Those men His disciples knew no such things: they went forth to journey afar, to suffer by land and sea, to know torture, imprisonment, disappointment, to suffer death by martyrdom. What then did He mean? If you ask that, remember that He said also, "Not as the world giveth, give I unto you." So then, He gave to his disciples peace, but not peace as the world gives.

Consider also one thing of which you have probably never thought. Not only do we at the feast of Christmas celebrate at once Our Lord's Birth and His Death: but on the next day we celebrate the martyrdom of his first martyr, the blessed Stephen. Is it an accident, do you think, that the day of the first martyr follows immediately the day of the Birth of Christ? By no means. Just as we rejoice and mourn at once, in the Birth and Passion of Our Lord; so also, in a smaller figure, we both rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs. We mourn, for the sins of the world that has martyred them; we rejoice, that another soul is numbered among the Saints in Heaven, for the glory of God and for the salvation of men.

Beloved, we do not think of a martyr simply as a good Christian who has been killed because he is a Christian: for that would be solely to mourn.

We do not think of him simply as a good Christian who has been elevated to the company of the Saints; for that would be simply to rejoice: and neither our mourning nor our rejoicing is as the world's is. A Christian martyrdom is no accident. Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. Ambition fortifies the will of man to become ruler over other men: it operates with deception, cajolery, and violence, it is the action of impurity upon impurity. Not so in Heaven. A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. A martyrdom is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God. The martyr no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of martyrdom. So thus as on earth the Church mourns and rejoices at once, in a fashion that the world cannot understand; so in Heaven the Saints are most high, having made themselves most low, seeing themselves not as we see them, but in the light of the Godhead from which they draw their being.

I have spoken to you today, dear children of God, of the martyrs of the past, asking you to remember especially our martyr of Canterbury, the blessed Archbishop Elphege; because it is fitting, on Christ's birthday, to remember what is that peace which he brought; and because, dear children, I do not think that I shall ever preach to you again; and because it is possible that in a short time you may have yet another martyr, and that one perhaps not the last. I would have you keep in your hearts these words that I say, and think of them at another time.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Down in Yon Forest

Down in yon forest there's stands a hall
The bells of paradise, I heard them ring
It's covered all over with purple and pall
And I love my Lord Jesus above anything

In that hall there stands a bed
The bells of paradise, I heard them ring
It's covered all over with scarlet so red
And I love my Lord Jesus above anything

On that bed there lies a knight
The bells of paradise, I heard them ring
Whose wounds they do
bleed by day and by night
And I love my Lord Jesus above anything

And by the beside there kneels a maid
The bells of paradise, I heard them ring
And there do weep by the night and by day
And I love my Lord Jesus above anything

At the bed side there lies a stone
The bells of paradise, I heard them ring
Which the sweet virgin Mary knelt upon
And I love my Lord Jesus above anything

Under that bed there flows a flood
The bells of paradise, I heard them ring
The one half runs water, the other runs
blood
And I love my Lord Jesus above anything

At the bed's foot their lies a hound
The bells of paradise, I heard them ring
A-licking the blood as it daily runs down
And I love my Lord Jesus above anything

At the bed's head there grows a thorn
The bells of paradise, I heard them ring
Whichever blows blossoms since He was
born
And I love my Lord Jesus above anything

Over that bed the moon shines bright
The bells of paradise, I heard them ring
Denoting our Saviour was born this night
And I love my Lord Jesus above everything

Christmas Trees & Decorations from the F&F Literary Family!



David Glenn





Charlie Godwin



Charlie Keeble

Nicholas Cardarelli



Leah Fisher





Abigail Falanga



Sara-Jayne Smith

Elizabeth Roper



Kenneth McIntosh



Wini Russell



Katrina Harper



Safwan Ahmad



Wesley Hutchins





Patrick Hilleary



Vanessa Parry



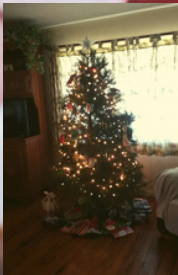
Amanda Pizzolatto



Martina Jurickova



Francis Granger



Hannah Skipper



Mac Goilla Bhuide



Sean Earner



Fr. Gerard Hatton



Dawn Cramner



James Ramirez



Ray Lipinski



Ray Lipinski



Avellina Balestri



Original Artwork, "Lady Mary", Painted by Zaineb Sajjad Ali

