

*An Advent calendar  
with a difference*



Stephen Cottrell

(Anglican Bishop of York)

**“So here’s the big one. What do I tell the children about Father Christmas? And when?”**

I think we rather let down our eldest child. We never told him the Christmas story. At least not properly. We told him all that stuff about Jesus, but the other Christmas story, the one about Father Christmas and sleigh bells and red-nosed reindeer and chimneys, well, somehow that one passed us by. We were not complete puritans on the subject. He did leave a stocking at the end of his bed and we did tell him that Father Christmas left presents, and of course he picked up a lot from school and television, who are very diligent in making sure everyone is up to scratch in these matters, but we didn’t go into detail. So much so that when I realized he was a bit shaky on the subject I went out and bought a copy of Spot the Dog’s First Christmas so that he could be suitably instructed!

But it needn’t be one story or the other: even the replete, white-bearded, unstintingly jolly twenty-first century Father Christmas has his origin in St Nicholas, who cared for the poor and distributed gifts. It is a Christian story. However, many people leave Jesus behind with Father Christmas. He’s good for children – baby Jesus definitely has the ‘Ah’ factor – but not for grown-ups. And yet Jesus persists. He grows up. That child in the manger becomes a man whose teaching and example challenge and change the world.

And while I don’t know any adults who still believe in Father Christmas, many continue to follow Jesus. Indeed, many who didn’t believe in him as a child start following him as adults.

So enjoy the Father Christmas story with your children, and when they question it help them to leave it behind. But enjoy the story of Jesus as well. And when they question it, allow it to lead them forward. It can show them how to inhabit the world.



- Read the story to your children. There are good children’s Bibles easily available.
- Read the story yourself – but make sure you get a modern translation.
- Enjoy the Father Christmas story, and invent a few weird family traditions of your own. Make a Smartie trail for your kids this Christmas leading from the foot of their bed to the presents under the tree, or a hidden present somewhere in the house.
- If you don’t have one already, invest in a crib and give it pride of place in the house, and light a candle by it in the evening.

**Your children need your presence more than your presents.**

JESSE JACKSON

**“And what do I tell them about God? And how, when I don’t know what I think myself?”**

It’s easy to get believing in God all round the wrong way. We think we need to understand and have all the answers – or at least most of them – before we can believe. Many people find it works the other way round: they believe in order to understand. They start from the premise that it might be true, that those feelings inside them telling them that there’s more to life than what they see around them might be right after all, and then, inch by inch, as they participate in the life of the church and try to behave in a way that matches up to these beliefs, understanding slowly grows.

This is called faith. It’s not the same as certainty. It always includes doubts. And there’s never a time when all the questions are answered. One question leads to another. And if your children ask you questions then give them honest answers. Don’t pretend you know it all. But don’t pretend you don’t know it all either. Most of us have a bit of faith, it just needs nurturing. Find a place for both you and your children where questions can be explored.

One of the names Jesus is given at his birth is Emmanuel. It means ‘God with us’. The Christmas story is about God revealed in a person, living among us, and known through relationship. Just like all human relationships, this one with

God requires honesty and trust. What we need to do now is give it a go.



- Will you go to church this Christmas and test out this hypothesis of love?
- What for you are the biggest obstacles that get in the way of believing?
- How might you be able to remove them? Who could help you?
- What could you and your family do to find out more about the Christian faith?

**In Jesus the whole test-passing, brownie-point earning rigmarole of the human race has been cancelled for lack of interest on God’s part. All he needs from us is a simple Yes or No, and off to work he goes.**

ROBERT FARRAR CAPON

**“So I went to a carol service. It was OK. Not great. Not awful. At least I knew the songs. But it was also disturbing. Something coming at me under the radar. A music that was unfamiliar, and yet the most pleasing and welcome sound I have ever heard: the voice of home.”**

The human heart is made for community with God. All the joyful, creative things that thrill the human heart – music and dance and football and poetry, walking in the Pennines, or cross stitching a tapestry – are echoes of the joyful, creative God whose overflowing love created it all in the first place and who made us creative. Whenever our heart misses a beat, either in joy or sorrow, we are in touch with the God who is always on the lookout for his beloved – that is us.

The Christmas story is the story of God’s searching for us: and at last he speaks to us in a language we can understand, the language of another human life. You might not have been looking for God. You might have assumed God was an idea whose time has been and gone. You might have decided Richard Dawkins is right. But then something happens and your present understanding of the world just seems too small, and you are transported, if only for a moment, into a different world where all the joys you’ve ever known are gathered together into one almighty now. This might be wishful thinking. It might be an attack of wind. It might be one too many vodka and tonics. But there are still millions of people who find in this story something no other story can offer.

Christmas carols tell the story. They may not always do it very well, and sometimes there is too generous a dose of sentimental twaddle. But they move us. They speak to the heart. They reanimate hope



- What things bring you the greatest joy?
- What moments in your life are so inexplicably wonderful that you cannot comprehend them without using the language of the soul, the heart, the spirit?
- OK, so your heart is just a big muscle pumping your very necessary blood around your very mortal body; but it is also something else, something that cannot be defined or understood without another sort of language, that seems like an echo from another life.
- Get out the mistletoe: who do you want to kiss?

**The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature.**

ANNE FRANK

**“Apart from stuffing the turkey, icing the cake, baking mince pies, wrapping the presents, buying the presents for the people I haven’t yet got round to, making a wreath to put on the front door (because we always put a wreath on the front door and everyone is nagging me to do it), replacing the fused lights on the tree, going to the supermarket for the shopping, making yet more mince pies, going back to the supermarket for the things I have forgotten, then I’m completely ready for Christmas. There’s just one question: will my Christmas be good enough?”**

One of the best Christmas dinners I ever had was when I was staying at my brother’s, and the very expensive free-range, organic turkey that he had ordered got lost in the post. He kept phoning up the company, and they kept assuring him it would be there by Christmas. But it never arrived. So we tucked into whatever was available – some chicken thighs out of the freezer, sausages, stuffing, sprouts, and thoroughly enjoyed a scrumptious feast.

So let me tell you a story. There once was a king who was completely overburdened by work, stress and all the pressures of running a busy and successful kingdom. At his wits’ end, he sought the advice of a holy sage: ‘What must I do to be happy?’ he asked. ‘There is but one cure for the king,’ the sage replied, ‘you must spend one night in the shirt of a happy man.’

Messengers were dispatched throughout the kingdom to search for a man who was truly happy. But everyone they found was also weighed down with misery and overburdened with stress. But at last they found a man – a poor beggar – who sat smiling by the side of the road. They asked him if he was truly happy and had no sorrows. He replied that he was. So they explained that the king must sleep one night in the shirt of a truly happy man, and that he would pay a large sum of money to procure such a shirt. The poor man burst into uncontrollable laughter: ‘I’m sorry,’ he replied, ‘I cannot oblige the king. I do not own a shirt’

- It’s not what you have, or what you don’t have, but what you do with it that counts.
- So forget about what you don’t have; let go of the things you no longer have time to fit in. Enjoy what you do have instead, and make the most of the time you have now – after all it is the only time you possess with any certainty.
- And why not start manifesting a few other crazy signs of happiness and goodwill. Say hello to the people you pass in the street, smile a bit more, and laugh at your adversities. I once read a survey comparing the number of times a child smiles each day to the number of times an adult does. The difference was alarming. Children’s smiles outnumbered adults by about ten to one. Let’s bump up our average!

**People can’t concentrate properly on blowing other people to pieces if their minds are poisoned by thoughts suitable to the twenty-fifth of December.**

OGDEN NASH

**“I’m not dreaming of a white Christmas, I’m dreaming of a connected Christmas, a rainbow Christmas, where I can see and enjoy all the different colours, and where somewhere in the middle of it I can stop for a moment and take it all in.”**

One of my best Christmas memories is from the church in Chichester where I was the parish priest. Because the building was so small, and because every other available inch of space was needed for chairs, we used to put the crib underneath the altar.

One Christmas morning, about halfway through the service, a little girl, Miriam, toddled up to the front of the church. She can only have been about two or three at the time. For several minutes she stood before the crib, gazing intently at the figures. Then, very carefully, so as not to wake the baby, she stepped inside and sat down. And as people looked at the crib that Christmas, as well as the shepherds and the angels and the ox and the ass, and Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, they saw Miriam. She sat there for the rest of the service, content to have become part of the story. She was the best Christmas sermon I have ever experienced. I think this is also the best example I can muster of how to get ready for Christmas this year.



- Now that all the preparations are done – or at least now that there is no more time for any more preparing – stop, and find a place of quiet.
- Be still. Get inside the story. Sit down. Make yourself smaller. In your imagination go to Bethlehem. Bend beneath the lintel of the stable door and come in.
- God comes to us in the vulnerability of a child. We can come to him in stillness. We can find him in silence. And Christmas can be put back together. And enjoyed.

**Christmas renews our youth by stirring our wonder. The capacity for wonder has been called our most pregnant human faculty, for in it are born our art, our science, our religion**

RALPH SOCKMAN

**“So here it is, Merry Christmas, everybody’s having fun; look to the future now it’s only just begun.”**

So sang Slade all those years ago (and in every shop in England for the past six weeks!), but here’s the nub, the real clue to the future: Mary listened to angels and found things born in her; travelled great distances and found things given to her; Joseph listened to dreams and found reality; the shepherds left their work and found their joy; and wise men abandoned the wisdom, charts, maps, compasses and guidebooks that they already possessed to follow a new star that was rising before them.

In order to listen and in order to dream; in order to smile with joy and in order to travel vast distances; in order to learn new ways and trust new leaders; you first need to stop, to take stock of what you really want from life and where you will really find the direction, affirmation and purposes you seek.

It is the longest journey you will ever make. It requires a complete reorientation. It is also the shortest – its beginning and end can be found in the stable at Bethlehem, a way in a manger. So, may I wish you a put back together and rebooted Christmas this year – things in the right order, first things first, and with it the joy and peace that is the heart of the Christmas story.



- Build one or two little extras into Christmas Day this year.
- Maybe say a prayer before you eat, or have a moment of collective silence as you give thanks for all you have received.
- Find that place of quiet that you are looking for and reflect on all that you have been trying to put back together as you have read this book, and make some early New Year resolutions.
- Raise your glass and drink a toast to the God of Christmas who visits you today.

**One of the most glorious messes in the world is the mess created in the living room on Christmas Day.**

**Don’t clean it up too quickly.**

ANDY ROONEY