

A Christmas Gift

Bill MacCurtain SJ

Bill MacCurtain SJ helps us to take a step back from the frantic pace of a twenty-first century Christmas, and to travel back to the little town of Bethlehem where we can find the true celebration of a happy Christmas.

What's to like about Christmas?

Lots of good things to eat? Well, for a lot of us that's nothing special. The only way you're really going to look forward to a feast of good food is if you are one of the many millions in our world who are starving. The trouble with us in the first world is that we have Christmas every day of the year and we are jaded.

Lots of lovely presents? People are short of money but we feel duty bound to spend money we can't afford to buy presents for people that they neither need nor want, so that they have to buy presents of a similar cost, the result being that we get cross and run into debt.

Family get-togethers? They can be fraught with danger. We might dread spending more time than we think to be enough with in-laws who don't really want to spend all that long with us. Then there are the many who live alone and feel that everyone is having a wonderful time and they are left out. They may not realise that they are to be envied.

Christmas cards? It seemed like a nice idea until it, too, got a little out of hand. We send off cards to the people we really want to get in touch with and feel resentful if they do not send us any. We also send them to people we think would be offended if they did not hear from us, compelling them to reply.

Christmas is for the children and they must be indulged, given lots of expensive presents to show how much we value them. However, the build up to Christmas inevitably leads to an anti-climax, tantrums and broken toys.



Christmas as we live it can be a season of moral, financial and social hijack in which we are all complicit and, to give us our due, we make the most of it: out of the detritus of Christmas wrappings and broken dreams we are honest enough to acknowledge that we are powerless to create heaven on earth and we journey to the crib. The world's favourite Christmas song is not *Jingle Bells*, but a rather sad carol by a sad poetess, Christina Rossetti's *In the bleak midwinter*.

We were designed for heaven so it is understandable we should long for it. When we fail to make it a reality at Christmas we are forced to acknowledge our helplessness and our need to travel to the little town of Bethlehem. Only there can we celebrate a happy Christmas together and joy to the world.....

The market place in Bethlehem was packed with the Census crowds who had flocked in from all the surrounding countryside and even beyond. Trade was very lively and there were shortages even of basic comestibles. The town had never experienced anything like it. And of course there was the usual sprinkling of spivs and tricksters that always materialised at such gatherings.

The local matrons were there exchanging the gossip of the day, moaning about the shortages and the lack of forward planning that was disrupting the even tenor of their way of life. One of the ladies, well known to have the sharpest tongue in Bethlehem, was holding forth about the scandal of the stable. She had told the innkeeper of the disgrace of allowing the riff raff to occupy his stable and saddling the community with

dysfunctional beggars who would be plaguing them, scroungers looking for handouts. Once you let them in it would be almost impossible to get rid of them. Furthermore, she had it on very good authority that they were not even married, and she giving birth to a child right there among the beasts!

Back in the stable there was a constant stream of young visitors. All the local children were excited at the novelty of the baby in the manger. They were crowding in, the older ones taking turns to actually hold the warm little bundle and marvelling at its tiny fingers that would close around theirs and the funny expressions that flitted over the small features.

One girl had brought a small jar of oil and another a loaf of bread that their mothers had told them to give to the child's mother. This prompted the other children to run home and pester their parents for a present for the manger baby.

Six-year-old Ben had brought his toy dove, cleverly carved from wood by his uncle. It was his most prized possession and he called it Shalom. Its wings could open and fold and as the infant's fingers

touched the toy its wings opened. For a magical moment Ben expected it to take flight, but the wings folded again. Ben knew his uncle would carve him another toy. But nothing in the whole of Israel could ever replace Shalom.

As the baby's mother tried to settle her newborn so that she might get some rest, the children reluctantly left the stable and made their way home. The women of the town were still gossiping and, unable to hold back their curiosity, they asked the passing children questions about the scenes in the stable. The stories they heard of doting parents, clearly in need of assistance but rejoicing in the birth of a baby, did nothing to temper their disdain. But the children who had visited the stable and seen a mother tenderly cradling her child knew that this was a day of celebration, and were glad that they had been able to help welcome the baby to the world.

Bill MacCurtain SJ is a member of the Jesuit Community at Mount Street in Central London.