

## Christmas by John Betjeman

The bells of waiting Advent ring,  
The Tortoise stove is lit again  
And lamp-oil light across the night  
Has caught the streaks of winter rain  
In many a stained-glass window sheen  
From Crimson Lake to Hookers Green.

The holly in the windy hedge  
And round the Manor House the yew  
Will soon be stripped to deck the ledge,  
The altar, font and arch and pew,  
So that the villagers can say  
'The church looks nice' on Christmas Day.

Provincial Public Houses blaze,  
Corporation tramcars clang,  
On lighted tenements I gaze,  
Where paper decorations hang,  
And bunting in the red Town Hall  
Says 'Merry Christmas to you all'.

And London shops on Christmas Eve  
Are strung with silver bells and flowers  
As hurrying clerks the City leave  
To pigeon-haunted classic towers,  
And marbled clouds go scudding by  
The many-steepled London sky.

And girls in slacks remember Dad,  
And oafish louts remember Mum,  
And sleepless children's hearts are glad.  
And Christmas-morning bells say 'Come!'  
Even to shining ones who dwell  
Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.

And is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,  
A Baby in an ox's stall ?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a Child on earth for me ?

And is it true ? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings  
Around those tissueed fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things,  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant,  
  
No love that in a family dwells,  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare -  
That God was man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine.

***And is it true, and is it true,***

***this most tremendous tale of all?***

We are here today, because we answer a resounding YES to that question.

We are here to celebrate the wonderful truth that God loves us so much that he came down to earth in order to share our human life, to give us an example how to live our lives, and to open up the way to a loving relationship with him.

It is such an amazing truth, that there are some who find it difficult to grasp or to accept. I came across a story recently, that helps us to reflect on this.

There was once a farmer who found it very hard to believe in the truth of Christmas, because he couldn't understand what it was all about.

However, his wife was different: she wanted to go to church on Christmas morning, to share in the happiness, and join in with the carols. *'Why don't you come with me?'* she asked her husband. *'I'm sure you will enjoy it.'* But, as usual, he refused. *'I just can't accept that God became a human being,'* he said. *'Why should he want to do such a thing? It's nonsense!'* And he went off into the kitchen to start preparing lunch.

So the farmer's wife left for church alone.

A short while later it began to snow, and as the wind got up, the snowfall turned into a blizzard. *'I hope the missus will be alright,'* the farmer thought, *'but she has her mobile, and can call for help if she gets into trouble'.*

Suddenly, there was a loud thump. Something had hit the window. The farmer looked out, but saw nothing except the snow.

An hour or so later, when the weather had improved, he ventured outside. In a field next to the house he saw a flock of wild geese. They had been flying south for the winter, but had become trapped by the blizzard, and disorientated. They were on the ground, lost, stranded, exhausted, and without food or shelter. They were in danger. All they could do, in their fear and confusion, was stay put. One of them must have flown into the window, hence the thump.

The farmer felt concern for the geese, and wanted to help them. The barn is warm and safe, he thought, and the birds can rest there until they regain their strength and sense of direction. So he walked over to the barn and opened the doors. He watched and waited, hoping the geese would see the barn and go inside.

But the geese didn't seem to realize what the farmer had done to try to help them. He waved his arms and tried to drive the birds into the barn, but this only made them more frightened. The farmer then went back inside the house to get bread to lay a trail from the field into the barn, but the geese still didn't catch on. Nothing the man could do made any difference, and the geese were now at serious risk from another approaching storm.

*'Why don't you follow me?'* shouted the farmer in frustration.

*'Don't you see I am trying to rescue you? Go into the barn!'*

But then he paused to think. Geese were nervous of human beings. *'If I were a goose,'* he said to himself, *'I could save them. I would be one of them, and they would trust me.'*

Then he had an idea. He went into the barn, picked up one of his own geese – Then holding it high, he released it. The bird flew through the stranded flock, and straight back into the familiar barn! Seeing one of their own, the wild geese followed, until all were safely inside.

The farmer watched silently. Then the words he had spoken to himself only a short time before came back to him. *'If I were a goose, I could save them.'* And it was at this point the Christmas message began to make sense to him. God had so loved the world, so loved all of us, he became one with us - became a human being - to show where happiness, hope, freedom, and love were to be found.

Human history, and so much of what we are like now, resembles those wild geese: As human beings we are so often all over the place, confused, lost, and with a badly damaged compass.

God had tried to give direction and hope through the years: the prophets of the Old Testament, the scriptures, the lessons of history, signs of his guiding presence – but all had been ignored. Human beings thought they knew better.

Sending Jesus, his own son, to Bethlehem – was the ultimate loving attempt to put things right.

The Christmas story is about God being here, with us, alongside us. Here to share in all aspects of our lives: The things that makes us laugh and love, feel good about ourselves – and sometimes not so good. He is here in our tears, disappointments, and regrets. He identifies with it all, and with us all.

Jesus' birth is a time of happy celebration, and thanksgiving. For *Emmanuel – God with us...* makes a real and tangible difference in our lives and the life of the world.

Often at this time each year, for a short while the world forgets its divisions. And those who are homeless, hungry, lonely, poor and distressed, are cared for in a way that they are not during the rest of the year.

But of course, Jesus isn't just for Christmas. He can be Emmanuel, God with us at all times, if we allow him to make his home not just in the stable at Bethlehem, but in our hearts too.

In this way, when all the decorations come down in 12 days time. When all the special family gatherings are over, God remains with us in the ordinariness of our every day lives too.

The suffering and darkness of the world does not permanently vanish because of Christmas. We might wish it would, but we know it will not. What Christmas does – is to assure us that in all life's challenges, we are cared for, known, loved, mended, strengthened, healed, forgiven, and affirmed... Because God is with us, we can find a way through life's difficult times. Because God is with us, we can find courage, peace, new beginnings, new hope, when from our human perspective things seem hopeless.

I end, where we began with words from the last verse of  
John Betjamen's poem...

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No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare -  
That God was man in Palestine  
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And for that, thanks be to God. Amen