

Approaching
CHRISTMAS



To my Mother, with love

Approaching
CHRISTMAS

JANE WILLIAMS



Copyright © 2005 Jane Williams
This edition copyright © 2012 Lion Hudson

The author asserts the moral right
to be identified as the author of this work

A Lion Book
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Mayfield House, 256 Banbury Road,
Oxford OX2 7DH, England
www.lionhudson.com
ISBN 0 7459 5590 2

First edition 2005
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

All rights reserved

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Typeset in 12/16 Lapidary333

Contents

Preface	6
Chapter 1: Christmas Spirit	10
Chapter 2: Making Lists	24
Chapter 3: Decorations	37
Chapter 4: Gifts	50
Chapter 5: Christmas Trees	61
Chapter 6: Music	72
Chapter 7: Food	84
Chapter 8: Family	96
Chapter 9: Christmas Eve	106
Chapter 10: Epiphany	116
Acknowledgments	126

Preface

I love Christmas. I love everything about it. I love standing in supermarket queues, where everyone is queuing for things they wouldn't normally dream of buying, and I love exchanging wry smiles with other parents in toy shops. I love the carols we sing in church in Advent, the four weeks of waiting before Christmas, and I love Christmas carols, too. I love the fact that Christmas is enjoyed all over the world, and that everyone thinks that there is only one way to celebrate Christmas, only all those ways are different. I've experienced Christmas in India, England, Wales and America and each was different but perfect.

As I shop and walk and drive around at Christmas, I'm always struck by the festive atmosphere. People seem to know that Christmas is a time for joy, even if they couldn't quite say why. It's as though there is a deep instinct in us that Christmas is a time for seeing the good in each other and the world. As a Christian, I want



to share my reasons for believing that that instinct is sound, but I also want to learn from the joy around me. In the meditations that follow, I am trying to make connections between the joys of celebrating Christmas that we share and the spiritual meaning that we might see in the way we decorate our houses or give gifts at Christmas time. My hope is that readers who already have a faith might find these ideas illuminating, and that readers who simply want to bring more reverence and depth to the celebration of Christmas might find some of the ideas and pictures helpful for meditating on life at this time. Like most religious writing and speaking, these thoughts are primarily aimed at the author. The deeper reality of Christmas can so easily be swallowed up by its sheer busyness. But, on the other hand, I want to be able to go on seeing Christmas as fun, as well as meaningful.

At Christmas we celebrate gift and generosity and open expressions of love. You don't need religion to understand that all of those things make life worth living. The Christian story suggests that gift and generosity and love are basic to what God does at Christmas, but also that religious people sometimes need to relearn this truth from others who have the Christmas spirit, even if they don't know the Christmas story.

If I know anything about Christmas, I learned it from my mother, who will always symbolize the spirit of Christmas for me. Every year she produced warmth and presents and love for a large family from small resources, and made us feel that the world was a place of generosity and trust. I dedicate this book to her, with love.



In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a



sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

LUKE 2:1–20

Christmas Spirit

The weeks before Christmas tend to be very busy in our house nowadays. We have lots of parties and carol services for all the different people who help an Archbishop of Canterbury to do his job, and we also have school concerts and plays to fit in, while trying still to get some ordinary work done. Rushing from one engagement to the next can begin to seem like an end in itself, to the point where I almost forget why it is that we're doing all these things in the first place. The word 'Christmas' may appear in the title of all the invitations, but there really isn't time to think about Christmas itself, because I'm just too busy. I find myself getting nostalgic for childhood days, when the excitement of Christmas built up slowly over the last few weeks of term, and all I had to do was look forward to it. I suspect my parents viewed the matter slightly differently, and were as



overworked as I now feel, but if so, they kindly concealed it from us children. When I found myself seriously considering having salad for Christmas dinner this year, I realized that drastic measures were necessary. I needed to rediscover Christmas.

It seemed like a good idea to go back and read about the first Christmas and the birth of the baby Jesus. I imagine that Jesus' mother, Mary, remembered how she first discovered that she was going to have a baby. It would have been hard to forget, as an angel came to announce it to her! Mary was clearly a remarkable person. The only question she asks the angel is about the mechanics – how is she, a virgin, to get pregnant? As soon as the angel has answered that, Mary says, 'OK'. She is fiercely glad that God has asked her to do this thing, but although she is rightly proud of her own role, she also knows that this is not just about her. The Bible shows that it is about God coming to establish a new world order, and to be close to the poor and the powerless. Part of Mary's memory is suddenly seeing what God was doing and being filled with a joy that made her sing aloud.

**My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices
in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour
on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on
all generations shall call me blessed; for the Mighty
One has done great things for me, and holy is his
name. His mercy is for those who fear him from
generation to generation. He has shown strength**



with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

LUKE 1:46–53

Then Mary remembers the long, hard journey she had to make, just before the baby was born. She and her husband Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to take part in a national census, and the regulations don't make any allowances for heavily pregnant women.

So Mary remembers the jolting movements of the donkey that carried her, and the weight of the baby inside her as she walked. And, of course, she remembers what it was like to give birth to her first child in a stable, with none of her family there to help her, only Joseph and a few kind strangers. Then she remembers the odd visitors who came to see the new baby. First some shepherds, who said a host of angels had sent them, and then, much later, some foreigners, who said that they had been led to her baby by a star. Mary remembers wondering what on earth she had let herself in for by saying yes to God's angel all those months ago. She remembers thinking about the shepherds and the wise men and wondering just what it was going to be like to bring up a baby whose birth was surrounded by such strange events.



Joseph's memories of the birth of their baby start with an angel, too, just like Mary's. It may even be the same angel. Who knows? This one comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him that his fiancée, Mary, is going to have a baby. Joseph knows it isn't his, but the angel assures him that Mary is to be trusted, and that he must marry her as planned and take care of her and the baby. Joseph remembers shouldering that weight of responsibility, knowing that it must be important if God's angel says so. Joseph remembers all the planning he had to do, to get Mary safely to Bethlehem and take care of her while the baby was born. He knows he didn't make a brilliant job of it – it would have been



better if he could have found a comfortable hotel for Mary to stay in – but he did his best. Like Mary, he remembers the odd visitors. They were only really interested in the baby, and Joseph remembers feeling left out and a bit anxious. Quite rightly, as it turns out, because the foreigners who have come following some star have stupidly alerted King Herod to the birth of the baby, and Herod wants to get rid of him, in case he turns out to be a



challenge to Herod's power. So Joseph remembers having to pack up and take the family away to Egypt in the middle of the night.

It wasn't the easiest thing to arrange, but he had promised the angel, and anyway he had begun to love the new baby too, so it wasn't just a matter of duty anymore.

It is fascinating to have these two different insights into the events of the first Christmas. But if Mary and Joseph's memories highlight different things as important, they do have some common themes. Most significant of all is their insight into the way God acts. It seems that the world looks very different through God's eyes and through ours. We may overestimate what we have to do to please God. Mary and Joseph only had to say yes, and God was pleased that they were willing to be part of the divine plan. Kings and rulers, bankers and priests like the world-order the way it is, and distrust this mad streak in God. They are not the ones that the angels visit. Mary and Joseph are excited simply to be working with God, and they don't care about what they are going to get out of it for themselves.

This, I believe, is at heart the spirit of Christmas. It is a willingness to value something else above our own personal comfort and security. It is a wild delight in other people, however inconvenient they might be. It is like Mary's willingness to have the baby who is going to cause her so much grief, and Joseph's determination to protect them both, even though the child isn't his. It is like God's desire to come and live with creation, even though it will not recognize God as its maker. That's why, I think,



the Christmas spirit is best symbolized by presents, by giving things away, just for the fun of it.

In Charles Dickens's book *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's young nephew puts this into words:

'But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round – apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that – as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!'

Scrooge's nephew doesn't expect this open-heartedness to last all year, but he still feels that it is, in some undefined kind of way, 'good'. Even those who are more bitter, or cynical, or just plain realistic, join in the attempt to preserve the illusions of Christmas. They may not believe that Christmas will make any difference to us grown-ups, but they connive at a fantasy world for children. Children, at least, must be allowed to go on believing in the 'Christmas spirit' for a few years before they have to face the grim reality of the world. But whether the cynics



would admit it or not, their attitude, just as much as that of the optimist, reveals an instinctive longing for a magical solution to things and a yearning for a ‘happy ever after’ world. ‘They lived happily ever after’ is the proper ending to all fairy stories and romances, and we readers willingly let our imaginations stop there. But really, of course, after the ‘happily ever after’ comes the rest of life, just as it does after the magic of Christmas.

I don’t believe it’s wrong to long for the world to be different – quite the contrary. But it is disabling if that longing gets focused on one or two unreal moments that are somehow supposed to deliver perfection without any effort on our part. And part of the dissatisfaction that often sets in after Christmas



is that we don't even really know what it is that we long for. We keep trying to satisfy our longing with things that we think we ought to want, and then we wonder why we're disappointed. We try to make up for it by saying, 'Well, at least the children enjoyed it', but actually we know that they are beginning to learn, too, that there is something hollow at the heart of so many of our pleasures. We try to pass on to them a formula for happiness, even though we know that it doesn't work for us, and when they begin to discover that happiness can't be bought for long with material possessions, we call it 'growing up'. We mourn the lost world of childhood illusions, because we have not discovered any other formula that works in the grown-up world.

That's why Scrooge's nephew is onto something. He is articulating what really makes Christmas a magical time – its ability to make people open up to each other and see their common humanity. This is what his sad old Uncle Scrooge has to learn. Three Christmas Spirits (and I'm sure Dickens intended the pun) come to teach Scrooge the reality of Christmas. They show him scenes from his past, his present and his future, and they help him to see how poverty-stricken his life is, for all his wealth. However rich he may be, all he has to look forward to in life is loneliness and unmourned death, unless he can discover the magical Christmas spirit of belonging that his nephew has described so eloquently.

If we come to the heart of our Christmas longings, surely this is what we will find: that we long to believe that we are loved and that we belong. That's what we are straining to say, however



inarticulately, when we say that Christmas is a time for families, or that no one should be alone and hungry at Christmas. We're reaching out for a definition of what might make us really happy, because it might be what we are designed for by our maker. But we constantly seem to try to make our lives work without looking at the design, as though we can do it by ourselves. It's like trying to put together some particularly fiddly child's toy without looking at the instructions, and then wondering why it's such an odd shape and why we have those ominous-looking pieces left over.

Yet according to the gospel stories, God decides that, if we can't work out how to share our lives with each other, another plan is needed: for God to share our life. At the first Christmas, Christians believe God came, born as a human child, to show us the magic of Christmas, the magic of sharing, the magic of being what we are meant to be.

God came without any protection, with no contingency plans to be airlifted out of the human situation if it should go wrong, but simply to share our life, and to ask us to share the divine life. God requires shelter and protection and nourishment and love, just as we do, because sharing is never one way. It is never just a matter of us condescending to share out of our riches, but needing nothing in return. Part of our design is that we cannot be complete without what other people have to give us, just as they cannot be what they are meant to be without us. As the baby Jesus lies in the hay, he is demonstrating the spirit of Christmas. This is the magic – this child, come to show us that every child,



every human being, is carrying about with them the true spirit of Christmas. I believe that God gives us Jesus to share, just as God gives us every human being we meet.

We are the mad, wild magic of Christmas, every one of us. We don't have to look any further, and we will never exhaust the magical potential of other human beings. The Christmas spirit will be with us forever. We have kept looking around trying to find it in other things, when all the time it was staring us in the face, looking out through the eyes of the person next to us. It seems we keep looking for the catch – surely that can't be all there is? Surely our hearts must really desire diamonds, and not just to stretch out a hand to another human being and feel them reach out for us, too?



In his book *The Coloured Lands*, the writer G.K. Chesterton says that we often behave as though we are determined only to believe in the solemn and the unpleasant. We behave as though, now we are grown-up, we must never again believe that simple fun is the meaning of life. We constantly subvert things from their true and joyful purposes, and insist that life is prosaic and pointless. But what if, he says, some mad uncle should propose the theory that:

... all the objects which children use at Christmas for what we call riotous or illegitimate purposes, were originally created for those purposes; and not for the humdrum household purposes which they now serve. For instance,

we will suppose that the story begins with a pillow-fight in a night nursery; and boys buffeting and bashing each other with those white and shapeless clubs. The uncle... would proceed to make himself unpopular with parents and popular with children, by proving that the pillow in prehistoric art is obviously designed to be a club; that the sham-fight in the night nursery is actually more ancient and authoritative than the whole institution of beds or bedclothes; that in some innocent morning of the world such cherubim warred on each





other with such clouds, possibly made of white samite, mystic, wonderful, and stuffed with feathers from the angels' wings; and that it was only afterwards, when weariness fell upon the world and the young gods had grown tired of their godlike sports, that they slept with their heads upon their weapons; and so, by a gradual dislocation of the whole original purpose of the pillow, it came to be recognized as having its proper place on a bed.

Suppose we were to apply that wild principle to the whole of Christmas. I think we have hidden the truth of it from ourselves by trying to satisfy ourselves with imitations. We have tried to discover the meaning of Christmas, its spirit, its magic, in something outside itself. But, for me, the meaning is exactly what we see when we look into the cradle of the baby Jesus – it is a human life, given to be shared. If we look at our Christmas longings with the eyes of Scrooge's nephew, or of Chesterton's mad old uncle, we might be able to see their true origins. We long to love and be loved, and that is, I believe, exactly what Christmas assures us of. God loves us enough to come and share our life, not just giving out of the divine plenty, but happy to receive out of ours. In her lovely Christmas hymn, Christina Rossetti writes,

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,
but what I can, I give him – give my heart.



Just as we have forgotten that, just possibly, pillows may have originally been designed for pillow fights and only incidentally for sleeping on, so we have forgotten, just possibly, that Christmas may have been designed for giving our hearts, not for trying to satisfy ourselves with other things. That, I believe, is what the baby in the manger comes to do – to ask for our hearts and to offer us his.

After his encounter with the ‘Christmas spirits’, Scrooge never saw them again, or needed to, because he had at last discovered the real spirit of Christmas:

... and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!