

1. Stories about the Real Meaning of Christmas

A. Straight from the Heart

The abbot was distressed. He had woken up that morning early, long before the first faint vestiges of light illuminated the specklings of frost on the hard ground. As he pulled back the curtains the abbot was compelled to watch the world take shape despite his haste. The faint horizontal threads of clouds were growing a fiercer red against the still grey sky, the streaks intensified to scarlet and to orange and to gold, until the whole sky was a breath-taking symphony of colour. Sunrise so rose his spirits that the abbot could easily understand why dawn worship had been a powerful primitive belief.

In a distant field a proud mother was still licking her newly-born calf. A few tattered leaves, made a flimsy blanket on the frozen earth. The calf had a red spot on his white face, so no doubt some would decide to call him Rudolf. On this day more than any other the monks marvel at the hand of God in the countryside.

By now the monastery was swinging into action. It was a particularly busy day in the monastery as for many people it was the time for the obligatory excursion to their Christmas confession for which many queued interminably.

Tradition in the monastery also dictated that the day before Christmas Eve a great clean-up began and every room in the monastery was turned upside down and inside out as if very special visitors were coming. Everything was dusted, swept, scrubbed, scoured or polished, curtains were washed, and great piles of sticks were chopped and stored in the shed. On this day more than any other the abbot marvelled at the hand of God in the countryside.

He had always loved Christmas but this year was going to be a problem because he was going to have to hurt one of his monk's feelings. Some old customs could momentarily transfigure our existence and let the eternal shine through. One such custom was the singing of carols. They struck the abbot as simple ways of expressing those parts of Christianity that ordinary people found most interesting, not the parts that people ought to find most interesting. They were memorable because they were so tangible. They celebrated things that we could touch and see and warm to: a mother and a baby, though curiously not a father, or at least not a real father, a stable, donkeys, shepherds, straw and hay. Now though the singing of Christmas carols was causing him a major headache.

A few days ago his problem seemed resolved. The problem had been dragging on now for a number of years. All the monks were getting old and although they were still able to do their chores, their voices were well past their best and the community singing had suffered terribly. The main problem was of course, Br Noel, who sang, if such a word could be used, in a high-pitched squeaky voice, doing violence to the ears of those unlucky enough to be in his immediate vicinity. Then, one day, as if by a miracle, a young man joined the community who had the voice of an angel. When he sang solo, everyone was enthralled by the sheer beauty of his voice. Time just

seemed to stand still. His solo singing brought a dramatic improvement to community worship, but not even he could cover up for Br Noel.

Now the abbot faced a new problem. The head of the Order worldwide Fr Ocome Emmanuel had unexpectedly sent a message to say he would be starting a three day visit to the community over Christmas. How could the abbot possibly subject Fr Ocome to Br Noel's singing? There was only one course of action, the abbot decided to instruct Br Noel not to sing while Fr Ocome was visiting. The abbot didn't want to hurt Br Noel's feelings, but pleasing Fr Ocome was more important than the pride of a simple monk.

Before Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve the abbot went out for a walk to clear his head and compose his thoughts for his sermon. Having Fr Ocome attend added to the enormity of the occasion. He wriggled his toes and rubbed his gloveless hands to keep warm in the cold of early night. The stars were like holes in God's carpet which allowed the eternal light to shine through. He tiptoed in his shiny wellingtons avoiding heaps of cow dung in the stable. A hoar frost lay on the fields and the hedgerows were hung with the lace trimmings of what seemed to be a thousand spiders' webs. The monk's cattle were huddling under creeping hedges, staring vacantly up at the slate-grey sky with their stoic eyes, as they churned the day's grass.

When he went back inside a pang of guilt came back to him when he saw poor Br Noel sitting quietly in the back of the chapel. Once Mass started though his conscience eased as the singing went beautifully. The abbot wore his best gold and white embroidered vestments, and the pale wax candles on the altar gleamed amid the lilies. On the window-ledges huge, white candles flickered slightly as a draught touched them, then shone as brightly as before. Despite the solemnity of the Mass the smell of incense smelt more beautiful than a springtime primrose. The pungent scent of greenery mingled with the waxy smell of burning candles. The final candle in the advent wreath was then lit ceremoniously. So many of the abbot's images of Christ were etched in light, the silver of frost and moonlight, the shining Star of Bethlehem guarding the Magi and the radiance of the lighted candles.

Then came a solo rendering of *O Holy Night* that was so beautiful it worked a minor miracle and hushed all the coughing and shuffling. The piece de resistance was the choir's version of the timeless classic: **Adeste Fidelis**.

Fr Ocome was loud in his praise of the quality of the singing. The abbot went to bed, a happy man that night. He smiled contentedly, thinking that the day couldn't have gone any better. He allowed himself to think about the next day and he licked his lips thinking about the feast tomorrow. The later morning hours would run on to the day's highlight, Christmas dinner, roast goose with ham and potato stuffing. The dessert was to be Christmas pudding boiled in liquid blue flames from a tablespoonful of brandy heated over a candle, and mince pies.

But that night an angel came to visit the abbot. "What happened to the singing tonight? We didn't enjoy it as much as normal. We particularly missed Br Noel's singing. He sings the Lord's praises so beautifully."

The abbot couldn't believe his ears. "Br Noel is a terrible singer. He has a voice like a growling dog. How could you possibly enjoy his singing."

“Ah, you don't understand,” said the angel, “You see in heaven, we listen to the heart.”

B. The First Christmas Miracle

Once upon a time, about two thousand years ago, there lived a boy called Harry Minogue. One morning he had been moving home a big bowl of water. It was much too heavy really for a boy like himself but he always did what he was told. He had almost made the mile and a half home when he lost his balance and the bowl crashed onto the ground, smashing into a hundred tiny pieces. He knew immediately that this meant big, big trouble from his father.

Harry decided he would run away. He ran and ran until he got very tired. By now it was very dark. He reached the local small town of Bethlehem, which unusually was full with people. Harry was scared by all the noise and started to cry. A kindly old shopkeeper saw him and gave him some apples and oranges. Harry was overjoyed and went to find a quiet place to enjoy this feast.

Just as he was sitting down outside a stable, he heard some shadowy figures come out from the darkness. Harry was upset when he heard the woman moaning in pain and holding her stomach. ‘That poor creature must be very hungry’, thought Harry. Without thinking he brought over all the apples and oranges to the couple. They thanked him warmly and then the man helped the woman into the stable and lay her down on a bed of straw.

Suddenly Harry felt a great sense of peace sweep over him and he decided he would return home. He was half way home when he met three beautiful women, with dark skin and wavy hair, in magnificent robes on camels. They were carrying what looked like very expensive presents. ‘Young boy do you know where the new king was born tonight?’ one asked. ‘I'm afraid I know nothing about that ladies but there was a lot going on in Bethlehem this evening.’

‘Please tell us what you saw’, said one of the women. ‘My name is Ruth by the way and this is Roberta and Rachel.’

While Harry told them everything that had happened to him the three women listened very carefully. When he had finished Ruth asked, ‘I know you are very tired but would you be kind enough to take us to see that woman in the stable?’

Quick as a flash Ruth stretched out her long arm and pulled Harry up beside her on her camel. Even before they got to the door Harry could hear a baby crying. ‘Where did that baby come from?’, he thought to himself.

Then the three women presented gifts to Mary. Roberta went first and she gave the new mother a basket of lovely soaps and oils and face-cloths as well as the tiniest clothes anybody had ever seen in Bethlehem. Next came Rachel and she presented Mary with a beautiful silk nightdress and dressing-gown. Finally, Ruth opened the wrapping paper off a bulky object. Mary's eyes nearly fell out of her head when Ruth calmly put a magnificent crib on the strawy floor and placed the baby in it and wrapped his blanket around him.

Harry felt bad that he had no gift for the baby. He quietly slipped outside. Young though he was, he knew that it was not the value of the gift that matters, but the spirit in which it is given. He went out to the woods and got a tiny holly tree and dug it up with his hands. It was a poor little thing without a single berry on it, but Harry carried the offering to the stable. When he walked back in the shepherds

started laughing at his miserable-looking plant. He knelt down before the baby's crib and, in a shaking voice, she said. 'Dear little child I'm sorry I could not give a beautiful present. The little holly tree was the best I could find, and I give it to you. I always give of my best.'

As soon as Harry had finished speaking a great hush fell upon the stable, for a wonderful thing had happened before their eyes. The colourless little holly tree had become covered with a mass of glowing red berries. It was the first Christmas miracle.