

# *A Mission of Peace*

*story-sermons for*

*Advent, Christmas and Epiphany*

*Ponderings and pictures by Robin Hill*

First published in 2025 by Robin Hill  
rhill@churchofscotland.org.uk

Original text and photographs © 2025 by Robin Hill

The right of Robin Hill to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved.

The materials in this publication may be used in acts of worship, study groups and church pastoral and outreach events without copyright infringement. Reproduction of the contents of this publication for commercial purposes is subject to the usual copyright restrictions.

Scripture quotations taken from The King James Version of the Bible are compliant with Crown copyright regulations.

Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV® copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used with permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

## Contents

Foreword	i
Preface	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Postal inspiration	iv
Advent Sunday: <i>Maria and the Fire</i> – a story of wisdom	1
Advent 2: <i>Freckles</i> – a story of stamina	7
Advent 3: <i>The Missioner</i> – a story of stealth	13
Advent 4: <i>Solstice</i> – a story of loss	19
Christmas Eve (all-age service): <i>AI</i> – a story of justice	25
Christmas Eve (watchnight service): <i>Orion the Hunter</i> – a story of wonder	31
Christmas Day: <i>Torkelsey Light</i> – a story of distance	37
First Sunday after Christmas: <i>Tear and Share</i> – a story of invitation	43
Epiphany: <i>Rough-hewn</i> – a story of striding	49
A Christmas request	55



## Foreword

*And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6b; NIV)*

Peace is a word that is easy to say, but incredibly hard to practise. Especially as a lack of peace is often the result of injustice, an imbalance of power, or a sense of injury. This year we have witnessed unbelievable horrors coming from Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine. And then there is what is unseen – those conflicts not newsworthy enough to make it onto our screens: Myanmar, Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to name but a few.

Across the world Christian Aid partners are working alongside those doing the incredibly hard jobs of maintaining hope and building peace. This year's Christmas resources focus on the DRC – a country rich in mineral wealth, yet scarred by malnutrition and poverty. A country that has been unable to properly tax their own resources to ensure an equitable future for all. Instead resources leave the country, making individuals and corporations rich whilst the people suffer. Conflict is driving misery and want for so many people. Christian Aid partners are providing cash grants to those who have fled violence and find themselves in displacement camps.

The stories in *A Mission of Peace* are an excellent resource for congregations to think again on Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. As we turn our attention once again to the Holy Land, we remember a young family travelling at an inopportune time due to the demands of the occupying forces. A family scared for the life of their baby with Herod ordering mass slaughter. A family on the run, crossing borders, leaving all that was familiar behind. A story that could be told again today thousands of times over.

Thank you for using these resources and for your support of Christian Aid's Christmas appeal.

And may you know the peace of Christ this Christmas.

*Val Brown*

*Head of Christian Aid Scotland*

## Preface

*A Mission of Peace* is a collection of “story-sermons” – the third of its kind, after *Illuminating Christmas* (2023-24) and *Glimpses of Glory* (2024-25) – offered in the hope that it might prove useful to worship leaders, discussion group organisers and individual readers.

Each December the days of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany offer preachers powerful stories straight from the gospels. Why, in that case, should ministers and worship leaders not themselves board the narrative train, coming up with a few more stories of their own, their intention being to connect with the wonder of the Child in the manger? And if something as simple as story-telling can point our neighbours (and ourselves) to the challenge and thrill of God’s great Mission of Peace to a world in pain, then so much the better.

How might these story-sermons be used throughout December and into early January? At the simplest level, they offer short and snappy substitutes for more traditional forms of preaching. December is busy, so here are resources for times of “worship-planning emergency”. Alternatively, each tale found here could serve as a kind of introduction, leading into a short sermon. Away from acts of worship, the stories can be springboards to personal devotions or starting points for chatting among friends, with four questions per story offered for starters (and many other questions open to appearance as issues are addressed and aired).

This year, nine stories are provided covering Advent Sunday through to Epiphany, and featuring such characters as a talking Christmas tree decoration with a passion for perseverance, and a secret artist in his high-rise hermitage in the American Midwest. Then there are three lighthouse keepers perched on a wave-tossed rock in chilly Shetland, plus an outdoor talk-and-walk on a frosty January morning. However few or many of the nine you might end up using, I hope you might find some of them useful.

When it comes, have a joyful, peaceful (and merry) Christmas,

Robin

*Rev Dr Robin Hill*

*East Lothian, November 2025*

[www.longniddrychurch.org.uk](http://www.longniddrychurch.org.uk)

## Acknowledgments

I would like to say a big thank you to:

- the readers (and actors!) of Gladsmuir Parish Church and Longniddry Parish Church for their always-wonderful delivery of our stories, and to members of the congregations who have been kind enough to say that they like what they have been presented with from the two previous volumes;
- our friends in the Church of Scotland's Presbytery of Lothian and Borders, not least the Mission Committee and Resourcing Ministry Committee, for their kind enthusiasm and timely promotion;
- the Church of Scotland's excellent Study Leave Team and especially Lindsay O'Riordan, Project Support Officer, for their wonderful support of my projects;
- Ann Durnford, Katie Hill, Peter Hill, Anne Hyde and Kenneth Simpson for their insights (whether literary, artistic, theological or practical);
- Christian Aid Scotland and Val Brown; and
- the Christmas Philatelic Club, for kindly sending my stories far round the world via their quarterly journal, *The Yule Log*. (Search for the Club on the internet!)

It would be good to receive your thoughts on these story-sermons, so please feel free to get in touch at: [rhill@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:rhill@churchofscotland.org.uk)

## Postal inspiration

Christmas stamps were the visual inspiration for this story-sermon project. If you would like to see the stamps which helped spark each story into life, you should be able to search them out on the internet.

***Maria and the Fire:*** Brazil 1200+400 Re’is stamp (1939–40): two girls look out of the flame-red image while adult hands rest on their shoulders.

***Freckles:*** Åland unpriced stamp (2008): a zany, determined-looking angel with arms outstretched, smiling brightly.

***The Missioner:*** USA 13c stamp (1977): a mailbox filled with parcels and covered in a thick layer of snow.

***Solstice:*** United Kingdom £1.55 stamp (2019): an ox and ass looking into a dark cave towards a child in a manger, a star twinkling overhead in the darkness of winter.

***AI:*** Palestinian Authority 200FILS stamp (1999): Mary being handed her newborn son by a woman, with Joseph asleep among the animals.

***Orion the Hunter:*** United Kingdom 2<sup>nd</sup> class stamp (2023): a view of the night sky over Bethlehem with the caption, “The silent stars go by”.

***Torkelsey Light:*** Isle of Man £1.51 stamp (2023): a puffin resting on a boat loaded with Christmas presents, with a lighthouse on a rock in the background.

***Tear and Share:*** United Kingdom 20½p stamp (1983): a blackbird and a white dove intertwining their beaks beneath a shared umbrella.

***Rough-hewn:*** Germany 85c stamp (2022): a wintry scene featuring a coniferous forest after a heavy snowfall.



# *Maria and the Fire*

*a story of wisdom*

## *First Sunday of Advent*

## *Psalm 1*

*Blessed is the one*

*who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and who meditates on his law day and night.  
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers.*

*Not so the wicked!*

*They are like chaff  
that the wind blows away.  
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

*For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. (NIV)*

*... the Lord watches over the way of the righteous ...*

*São Paulo, Brazil, 1939: Headmistress Fernanda da Silva is visiting the city's Education Department to clarify the situation of Maria dos Santos, a brilliant former pupil rumoured to have been visited by an angel.*

The new Director of Education for São Paulo was proving a fine appointment. Here was a new broom who was determined to bring about the cleanest of sweeps. Within only a few months he had implemented progressive measures which previously would have been unimaginable. Under his enlightened leadership he had won a budget increase from the municipality while attracting sizeable match-funding from local businesses. He had initiated a root and branch review of corruption among his senior officials, with half of his deputies facing criminal charges and lesser offenders quietly “retiring”. Best of all, the cause of the department’s woes, the Director’s predecessor, Bernardo Pereira, had now been relocated to a new post as Prisoner 85692, City Penitentiary, having been convicted of conspiracy to murder a young school leaver by the name of Maria dos Santos.

“Miss da Silva to see you, Director.”

“Excellent – please show her in.”

As the Director rose from his busy desk, the tall and elegant figure of Miss Fernanda da Silva glided through the doorway. Coffee was enjoyed, with friendly small-talk exchanged. Then the reason for the meeting was tackled head on.

“Miss da Silva, I think you realise why we are here. The case of young Maria dos Santos is a troubling one. We have intrigue, a disappearing pupil and – let’s not forget – allegations of a visiting angel. But now that the Press has moved on to other scoops and Maria has been forgotten, I have to ask you this: what is her story?”

Miss da Silva nodded pensively: “Of course, Director. And if I may say, thank you for your open-mindedness. (In the past, some have been a good deal less understanding). And so to Maria: she did indeed receive a visit from, as you have noted, an angel. She then convinced me that her life was about to take a dramatic turn, requiring her to leave our school and move

to the home of her elder cousin Elisabeta. In due course a baby boy was born, just as the angel had said, but there were those who feared the new arrival. The family, well aware of the mortal threat which faced them, made their escape into Paraguay. A risky move, yet it paid off. Now they are home, and home is where they shall stay ... for the present at least.”

The Director rested his elbows on the arms of his leather chair, fingertips pressed together. “As headmistress, you are satisfied that Maria is in ... a good situation?”

“I am indeed. Maria is a person of amazing resilience and faith. The reality is that as a young student she already had the bearing of an adult three times her age. She brought such wisdom to our little school.”

“Wisdom?” asked the Director. “In what sense?”

“If you will permit me one story: you will no doubt have heard of the school fire of October 1933? A terrible disaster at the time, yet it could have been so much worse. Maria saw the flames and rushed from classroom to classroom managing the evacuation like a senior staff member. As the teachers stood outside at a safe distance gathering the girls, I realised just what a sensitive and spiritual soul we had in this Maria. ‘All will be well,’ she told me, with an almost chilling confidence. ‘Have no fear, Miss da Silva. God will provide.’ ... And God did.”

The Director leant forward, smiling gently: “You were blessed to have Maria in your time of crisis, just as she was similarly blessed to have you in her moment of decision. What will happen to her now?”

Miss da Silva raised her eyes to the ceiling, recalling all that had happened: “Your question is a fair one. I cannot say, though I feel certain that anyone visited from heaven will have quite a future ahead of them. She and I will keep in close contact.”

The meeting over, Miss da Silva walked into the fresh morning air, the sunshine warming her face. As she strolled down the fashionable boulevards of the city centre she allowed her memory to wander back to those happy days when Maria had been so much a living, breathing part of school life. Back then, the headmistress had worried for her protégé, not on account of any weakness on the student’s part, but because of her unmistakable thirst for justice, able as she was to stand up and speak out for many a downtrodden soul of São Paulo. It was as though the darkness of doubt and muddle simply evaporated when Maria spoke truth to power. She was never dogmatic, never bombastic, always cherishing the truth as

again and again she would cast light upon any shadowy, grubby, weary adult topic. It had been enough to amaze the most experienced of the school's faculty.

The girl's commitment to her chosen causes would always make her an enemy of oppression. And, if truth be told, Miss da Silva had become fearful of how the authorities might react to a dangerous young revolutionary in their midst. Thankfully, Bernardo Pereira's wicked plot to have Maria dispatched by the secret police had been thwarted, with that dreadful bully now safely behind bars, his target free to live her life. But, yes. What of the future? The teenager had dodged her bullet, but now she and her baby boy would each grow into adult life, knowing that the ways of truth and courage are rarely straight or smooth. Or, in any sense, safe.

Still, she remembered, there had been that momentous day when Maria's strange visitor had brought the girl her life-changing news. His announcement must have counted for something. Who could fail to be impressed by angelic tidings, after all. The road ahead would be rough – of that there could be no doubt. “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked,” mused Fernanda as she reached a familiar crossroads, “or stand in the way that sinners take.”

That is precisely the point, thought Fernanda as she nodded to herself at the busy junction. Maria shall not fear being compromised or diverted from her heavenly task. She has been tested before, first at school in the face of its destruction, then when she might so easily have been gunned down in yet another anonymous State execution. When trouble looms Maria will know what to do. Yes, she will. And as for her baby boy, he will be raised in a family which knows what it means to walk in the light. Just like his mother, so too he will face threats and dangers, but surely there will be angels waiting for him, guiding, strengthening, leading him forward on a journey of challenge and pain. Only time ... and God ... would tell.

Rounding a corner into a dank little lane occupied by the same old canasta tables as ever before, this remarkable teacher of courage and faith saw ahead of her the familiar sight of a tiny *boteca*, a neon light flashing out its name: *The Blue Parrot*. Stooping slightly to enter the doorway, she peered through the smoky darkness to glance around the little tables as the radio blared out a popular folk song. At last, her eyes rested upon a corner alcove occupied by two of the bar's more unusual regulars: a bright-eyed young woman of no more than school age and a baby ... safe and secure in his mother's arms.

### ***Pause for pondering:***

1. The opening sentence of the Book of Psalms cautions against walking “in step with the wicked”. How does Fernanda keep in step with goodness?
2. Have you ever found “the darkness of doubt and muddle” being overcome and, if so, did any sort of illumination replace it?
3. Maria has a staunch ally in her old headmistress. Why is Fernanda so determined to support the girl and her baby son?
4. Does this story offer any insights into how the person of faith might journey forward through life’s trials?

### **Space for note-taking:**



# *Freckles*

*a story of stamina*

## ***Second Sunday of Advent***

***Luke 1:5-15***

*In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.*

*Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.*

*Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. (NIV)*

... *an angel of the Lord* ...

Gillian was looking at me in amazement. “You’re going *where*, Zechariah?”, she asked (using my Sunday name to maximum effect) the note of incomprehension clear in her voice.

“Well,” I responded, a little defensively, “it strikes me that I’ve never been to a Quaker meeting before. And Ken has invited me, so I’ll be going to the Religious Society of Friends ... with a friend ... who’s a Friend ... if you get my meaning. In any case, you’re on an early shift so you won’t be going to church until the evening.”

“Zak, it’s the second Sunday of Advent, which means carols and anthems and lovely church music at the cathedral. And what will you get at the Quakers? Silence!”

“Ah no!” I retorted. “Ken says that there’s also going to be an all-age Nativity play.”

“Well fancy that,” she mused. “A Quaker Nativity. Mimed, I shouldn’t wonder.”

How wrong she was. True, the Quaker meeting itself was fairly quiet, though there were many words of spiritual wisdom offered by the Friends in their act of worship. Then, after a handshake was shared at the close, the arrival of the kids and their parents brought a change of tone, with costumes and props and cuddly toys. There were all the familiar characters, each one with his or her speaking part.

This was a memorable Sunday, made all the more special by what happened next. Over coffee, the cast members strolled among the adults handing out Christmas tree decorations crafted by the youngsters the previous Sunday - each one a seasonal character made of card with glitter-pen eyes, nose and mouth. A tiny wise man came up to me with a mumbled “Happy Christmas” as he thrust a grubby angel in my direction. This decoration was dressed in a gown of silvery-white crepe paper, rounded off with checked card wings to add a note of realism. Her long arms were outstretched, while her wild hair was a distinctive shade of gold.

“Thank you so much!” I said. “And a Happy Christmas to you too.”

“That’s wee Alastair,” said Ken. “His dad was the second penguin in the Nativity. Oh, and that’s a nice angel you’ve got there!”

He wasn't joking. As I took my first proper look at her, I was struck by something very attractive: a sense of determined confidence radiating from her face - a simple face with a mouth which curved up just a little into a knowing smile, the whole thing rounded off with some of the nicest freckles I had ever seen. Just one heavenly messenger among many being handed out that December morning, but for me this little angel was a unique gift: an unexpected treasure who, in keeping with her Quaker roots looked filled with peace.

"Hmm," I said to Ken. "That's really touching. I'm going to take good care of her."

And so I brought my new tiny friend home to our flat, securing her to the Christmas tree with the loop of jaggy twine which had been taped to her back. When Gillian came home after a hard shift on the ward, her comment struck a chord with me: "Wow! Look at those cute freckles."

"Funny you should say that," I replied. "The moment I set eyes on her, straight away I spotted them too."

"There you go then, Little Quaker angel," she said. "There's your name ... Freckles."

Over the twelve days of Christmas, the angel Freckles adorned our little tree – just as she has gone on to grace our family festivities for decades now. Over all these long years of service she's experienced more than her fair share of domestic traumas. But she's quite the survivor, inspiring me to consider Christmas in a bit of a new light.

Each Advent, Freckles has been lifted with care from the big old biscuit tin of decorations – always the first to emerge into the light. Then, when January comes, she will be the last one put away, placed on top of all the fashionable baubles in all their many forms. Today, though, she is anything but fashionable herself, because of the seasonal battering she has taken over a great many Decembers.

A few examples: maybe five years into her time with us, Freckles suffered the indignity of being grabbed from her branch by our toddler son. Dylan thought it would be fun to dance with an angel, but once their gentle Viennese waltz turned into more of an Argentine tango (or was it a Highland fling?) Gill heard a sudden ripping sound followed by the words, "Poor angel. Sorry Mummy."

With her severed arm soon taped back in place, Freckles returned to her perch (on a slightly higher branch, it should be said). Despite her sad accident, I saw that her sense of confidence remained undimmed. It seemed like she was looking me in the soul as she passed on a

Christmas message of defiance. *“My arm might be hanging off but they’ll never break my spirit. I’m on a mission of peace. Do not be afraid, Zechariah!”*

The next emergency involved our golden retriever. One day, Ivy was seen prancing through our flat with something hanging out of her mouth. On closer inspection this “something” turned out to be the freshly kidnapped Freckles in some imminent danger of being turned to a mush of paper and dog drool. It took quite some effort to prise Ivy’s jaws apart before carefully peeling our friend from a now rather glittery tongue. An enormous band of saliva spanned the little angel’s body, though she was still in one piece. Some gentle pad-pad-padding with a dry cloth, followed by a couple of hours near the radiator restored her to something not so far from her former glory, though the signs of her injury were obvious. Still, looking at our courageous little pal I sensed that she remained unperturbed by her close shave: *“Hounds ... wolves ... retrievers: they will come and they will go, but they will never divert me from the true path of peace. Do not be afraid, Zechariah!”*

Then there was that day when our daughter had just finished her first term at primary school. Unknown to Gillian and me, Lucy thought it would be fun to place the angel “by the cosy fire” - only she got a little too close to the burning logs.

“What’s that smell?” shouted Gill from the kitchen. I sniffed my way in the right direction only to find a badly singed angel, her left foot and a bit of flowing gown smouldering gently. Freckles (and perhaps the rest of us) had quite an escape that day, with young Lucy learning a timely lesson in fire safety. After the clearing up operation, as I rehung Freckles on her branch once more, I gave her a good checking-over. As ever, she smiled back at me with what seemed to be a combination of relief and resolve. *“It’ll take a whole lot more than a bit of burning to stop me! My purpose is to deliver Good News straight from heaven for all the earth to know (including young fire-raisers). Do not be afraid, Zechariah!”*

Looking back on it now, I can see that Gillian had been right: our Quaker angel is indeed rather quiet. That said, she always speaks to me at least, echoing the call of her brave biblical forebears: a call which trumpets God’s love, pointing to heaven’s dream of peace on an earth which knows such violence.

It takes more than determination to be an angel in a world of grave danger, but our angel just carries on, as her calling demands. And her loving, precious smile seems to endure all things. Through injury and accident, grease mark and jammy smear, Freckles just keeps on calling to me year by year: *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah!”*

### ***Pause for pondering:***

1. In Luke 1, first Zechariah, then Mary, then the shepherds are instructed: “Do not be afraid”. In what ways is that message important to the Christmas story as a whole? And how is it important to the Christian faith?
2. What made Freckles such a precious gift to receive after the Nativity play?
3. What, if any, inanimate objects have “spoken” to you?
4. Freckles is certainly a tenacious little angel. If the Church shared her passion for delivering Good News, what might that passion look like, and what might it achieve?

### **Space for note-taking:**



# *The Missioner*

*a story of stealth*

## ***Third Sunday of Advent***

***Matthew 6:1-15***

*‘Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

*‘So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

*‘And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

*‘This, then, is how you should pray:*

*“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,*

*on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us today our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts,*

*as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation,*

*but deliver us from the evil one.”‘ (NIV)*

... *This, then, is how ...*

**T**he man with the long white hair and matching beard cut a solitary figure across the city with his Timberwolves cap and shabby dungarees. You might easily imagine he had just rolled into downtown Minneapolis from some distant pig farm like a superannuated prodigal son. But this retired schoolteacher had known only a life of inner city living. As for those around him, they had no idea of the scale of his vision and the depth of his talent. A deliberately hidden talent.

To the average passer-by this man looked nothing like the standard caricature of a monk. But behave like one he surely did. Spiritual rhythms and patterns of prayer had become his unflinching rule of life. Rising at 5am he would throw wide the window of his little bedroom and breathe deeply, speaking in whispers to the God who had bestowed on him another day of living. After a period of reflection in front of his war-torn Bible there would be a simple bite of breakfast (the radio news as his companion) before a long walk around the streets of his neighbourhood, buying necessities and gently greeting his neighbours and their dogs on the banks of the great Mississippi. After a coffee he would wend his way homeward to devote the rest of his day to a spiritual practice which had become both his calling and his passion. And all behind closed doors.

His studio was nothing more than the repurposed pantry off his kitchen. It sported a tiny table, a chair and his magnifying lamp. Here, one of the world's most famously anonymous – and most successfully evasive – painters worked in total seclusion, creating religious works of almost frightening beauty. For from this plain little apartment in an unassuming block on a regular city street, creations of unimagined wonder emerged from darkness into light – oil paintings on plain, flat rocks.

In all his years as a practising artist, the only personal detail he had ever publicly divulged had been shared through the signature on each of his works. It read simply: “The Missioner”. Far more a job description than a name, it conveyed a sense of divine purpose – a purpose which had occupied his waking hours for decades. Each painted stone of The Missioner was brought into being in the hope of guiding troubled souls into the presence of God Incarnate through the beauty of fine art. Every one of the rocks which passed through his hands would come to bear an image of the Christ child, sent out as a life-changing gift to a person in need.

The Missioner's work had first come to light 30 winters earlier when, one snowy late November morning in the suburbs of St Paul, Minnesota, a young woman named Annie

crackled across the snow to empty her overflowing mailbox. Among its many contents was an unassuming package wrapped in brown paper.

Life had been tough these last eleven months since the death of her husband John. Now she and the boys were alone, each of the three silently dreading the days of emptiness which lay ahead. Back in the warmth of her little home, she looked at the parcel which had turned up so unexpectedly, her name and address written in the most beguiling of hands. As she set about opening it, Bruce and Johnny came running. In no more than a few seconds the deed was done, the object revealed for all to see.

“Aaaaaw!” gasped the boys in unison as their eyes alighted upon a painting of rarest delicacy, depicting the baby Jesus lying in a manger of finely detailed straw, a tiny field mouse perched on top of the pile. The breath-taking image was captivating, created with all the vibrancy of a Pre-Raphaelite master. The infant was looking up at them, eyes connecting with those of the troubled family by the Christmas tree.

“Wait ’til I tell Mandy!” yelled the older brother in wild excitement.

“And I’ll go and find Josh! Right away!” echoed the younger boy. Off they ran in their different directions with their good news of great joy, which soon would be spread far and wide across young families of the neighbourhood and beyond.

In the days leading up to Christmas a less than heavenly host of journalists took an interest. Before long, curiously similar stories began springing up across the country. In Miami, for example, a stone painting of a Mother and Child had been found by a patient on a hospital ward. The image was different yet the hand was the same and the message clear for all to read: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child.”

From San Jose to Portland, Maine, The Missioner’s plain brown parcels mysteriously made their way to frequently forgotten corners: a prison canteen, a picket line, a food bank, the shell of a fire-bombed church. TV networks took up whatever leads they could find, yet each scoop would run aground. December passed and January too, with the unknown artist remaining as he wanted to be: incognito.

The same, however, could not be said for the recipients of his masterpieces, many of whom were pleased go public with reports of big offers received yet declined – opportunities to sell a work of The Missioner. One unnamed collector, it was rumoured, had approached a homeless woman in New York with a cheque for a six-figure sum, only to be rebuffed. No,

she wanted her unexpected gift to be exhibited for all to marvel at, in a big municipal gallery. And there it would remain.

Each winter new parcels were mailed out to The Missioner's small and trusted team of conspirators. The artworks might end up beneath a Philadelphia railway bridge on the first of December or at the vending machines of a Detroit bus station on Christmas Eve. One even made it into The White House (quietly left there for a junior mailroom clerk).

Public fascination only grew as the years turned to decades. Who *was* this invisible genius of the paint brush? And what the thinking behind his project? How had an apparently endless flow of painted rocks gone to thousands of people who found their lives lit up in an untameable glow of love? The secrecy of it all was captivating, yet the perpetrator of this decades-long battle against the darkness never once showed his face.

One cold February morning, The Missioner was in one of his daily haunts, Joey's Diner. This was a special place where he always felt at home amid the tinkling of cutlery and the rapid-fire chatter of the friendly waitresses. In front of him was the discarded case of his bran muffin, an empty coffee cup and that day's *New York Times*. Immersed in thought, he hardly noticed the neatly dressed woman who had slid in by his side, joining him in the booth.

"Oh, my word – if it isn't John Patrick Carter! It must be 50 years. Christine Doherty. St Peter's High? Class of '67? Pat, I would recognise you *a mile* away."

"Chrissie? ... Forgive me, of course it is!" he sighed joyfully, a young girl's gentle smile flashing across his memory. "How wonderful! How truly ... *truly* ... wonderful."

Ordering a large pot of mint tea and cinnamon toast for two, the teenage sweethearts looked deep into each other's eyes, suddenly reclaiming their innocent youth in a diner which had meant so much to them those many years ago.

"You know," Chrissie said, "I always knew we would meet again, someday, on one of my trips home to visit Dad. God bless us! What a thrill it is to see you, and looking so well. Tell me Pat, what you been up to since I went into the Convent?"

"Well, Sister," drawled her old boyfriend with a chuckle, playing for time as he chose his words well, "you know how it is. Bin keepin' my head down, teachin' high school art across the inner city. A quiet life really ... just doin' the work o' the Lord."

## ***Pause for pondering:***

1. In Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount places great emphasis on simple prayer and unseen generosity. How does the Missioner's life match up to Jesus' teaching? And how might we use the same passage to rejuvenate our own faith?
2. Pat lives modestly, close to God, yet changes the world in big ways and small. Do you envy his faithfulness? Or do you find it alien to your way of believing?
3. What would you do if a stunningly beautiful artwork from The Missioner were to arrive unannounced on your doorstep?
4. If you were to continue writing this story, what would Chrissie and Pat say and do next?

## **Space for note-taking:**



# *Solstice*

*a story of loss*

## ***Fourth Sunday of Advent***

## ***2 Corinthians 1:1-7***

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,*

*To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia:*

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. Amen.*

*(NIV)*

*... it is for your comfort ...*

Over many years of using telephones of one kind or another Maureen Brown understood this much as a matter of certainty: any call which arrives in the middle of the night is likely to bring bad news. And at 2.47am on that mid-winter night, she knew what awaited her fumbling fingers as, spider-like, they darted in reflex mode across the cluttered bedside cabinet.

“Hel-lo,” she drawled sleepily as she tried to remember where and who she was.

A clear and unmistakable voice could be heard on the line: “Good morning, Maureen. This is Ivan. I am sorry to waken you with some sad news, but your Dad has passed away in the night.”

Maureen’s initial reaction was one of calm relief, quickly followed by a sudden pang of guilt. On and off (though mainly on) she had been waiting for this call for several months and so no matter how much she had been startled by the ringing phone, the call itself came as no surprise. But why didn’t she feel any hammer blow of grief at the news of her father’s death? Instead, swinging into management mode, she found herself asking an awkward question: “When do you want his room?”

“Please, Maureen,” came the hushed tones of the carer she had got to know so well over the last 18 months, “there is no need to worry about that. I knew that you wanted to be contacted if your father died, but these things can wait. No problem.”

With thanks and good wishes exchanged, Maureen laid the phone down and turned to Jack. “There we are then,” he whispered, still half asleep. “Cup of tea?”

“Go on luv. I’m not going back to sleep now, am I?”

But Maureen did manage to get back to a sleep of sorts. As someone who never remembered her dreams she was surprised to waken up at half past six with clear images from her dad’s life still bouncing around the walls of her head: childhood memories; graduation lunch; that wedding speech where he had thrilled the guests with his rendition of the Old Grey Whistle Test on blues harmonica; seeing him hold baby Andrew at the maternity hospital ... or was it Jane? The detail proved to be a bit nightmarish in the vivid colouring of memory, but it was also very special: a cherished life relived through the medium of dream, and all just for her.

The morning that followed filled up quickly with an early visit to the care home and a big hug from off-duty Ivan. Then it was back home for the seemingly endless round of phone calls and e-mails. After a nice trip with Jack to their favourite pub, The Ferret and Albatross, where they enjoyed a relaxed pub lunch, the afternoon saw a stream of visitors bearing cards and flowers and well-meaning sponge cakes. Then, at seven o'clock on the dot, a key could be heard in the door. In walked their daughter Jane, and that was when, at last, the flood gates caved in, as emotion finally overpowered administration.

There was fond reminiscence over tea and toast and the best of the sponges. (By then nobody could face proper food.) In time this gave way to chat about the unexpected side of all the things unfolding around them.

“You know,” said Maureen, “a lot of stuff I could have predicted – that sense of relief, the necessary contact with cousins and colleagues, and such like. But what I didn't prepare myself for was bereavement at Christmas. It's just wild!”

“I know!” shouted Jane, wide-eyed in thankful recognition. “I was driving along the motorway and all I could see were the Christmas posters and the Christmas lorries with pictures of mince pies and elves and snowflakes and all the rest. I felt an unbelievable, stupid sense of dislocation.”

“Yes, that's it,” replied her Mum, knowing exactly what Jane meant. “I fully understand that he's gone ... and I'm pleased for him. He'd had enough, and more than enough. But all this festivity nonsense: it's like being cast as an unwilling extra in a TV Christmas special. It's all so mind-bendingly bizarre. Never known anything like it.”

Just then, Maureen's smartphone rang yet again. Taking the call, she rose to her feet and left the room, only to return two minutes later.

“That was Audrey,” she said in a grateful tone. “So nice of her to call. Offered to pop round for 'a minister's visit', but I told her that tomorrow at lunchtime would do just fine. And we're bound to end up opening a bottle, so *no car*, I said.”

Next day, Maureen and Audrey spent a good hour or so chatting and recalling and doing the odd bit of initial thinking about the funeral that was to come. Nothing major though. As Audrey said, all of that could wait for another day. Then the minister leant forward, as though about to launch into something very important: “A question for you, but please – *please!* – don't feel you have to answer it.”

“That’s fine!” laughed Maureen, confident in her friend’s compassion.

“OK then. So my question for you is this: right now, in this moment, *who are you?*”

“I,” said Maureen, with only the slightest of hesitations, “am a foreigner in an incredibly ... strange ... land. That’s *exactly* who I am. I went to bed two nights ago a fully-fledged dweller in the land of Christmas, with all the joy, all the happiness it has to offer. Then with a single phone call in the middle of the night, I was on the outside looking in. Out went the lights: the Santa lights ... the reindeer lights ... the chestnuts-roasting-on-an-open-fire lights. All the damn lights ... *bang!* ...gone. But while I’m out in the darkness, all the world – it seems to me – is still wreathed in fairy lights that keep on twinkling madly. And people on the streets, folk in the pub, children and their parents in all those shops on the high street – everyone keeps rushing to the light while I’m just seeking asylum, safe in the shadows. It’s like ...”

But all of a sudden, Maureen stopped in her tracks, overtaken by the power of the thought which had just struck her. She held up a single, pointing finger as if to conduct the silence which was suddenly filling the room. For 20 seconds ... 30 ... and more, the finger tapped the air very gently while it held back all words, with Audrey respecting the nothingness of the moment. Then like a baton at the close of a long symphony, at last the finger fell, as Maureen found her truth.

“It’s like ... it’s like nobody cares ... nobody cares. ... Well, *we* all care. Of course we do! But who *out there* notices? People don’t want to see the big picture: the truth that all this light ... light that finds its way into every single nook and cranny ... is ... well, it’s just a bit rubbish. And nobody sees that what I need in this sad, special moment is a decent bit of *darkness* – a darkness that has ... that has ... its own place ... its own validity.”

Audrey cradled her glass of red wine in her hands. “Write me the prayer,” she said at last. “Write me what it is that I need for Christmas Eve. Tell it like it is and don’t hold back. Show me what I have to say to God and everyone else at a time like this. Because, while I don’t have the words, *you do*. And Maureen: you are a refugee from the light, so there must be so many more women and men and girls and boys who are refugees as well. What do you say?”

“Good plan,” said Maureen. “I’ll be pleased to do that. And, you know what? I’ve got my first few words already: ‘God of the blessed darkness ...’”

### ***Pause for pondering:***

1. St Paul writes about people “sharing in our sufferings”. Can you identify ways in which Jack, Jane and Audrey share in Maureen’s sufferings?
2. Why might the arrival of Jane in particular have been the cause of the emotional floodgates opening?
3. Have you ever felt “dislocated” at Christmas? What form or forms did it take for you?
4. You have the very start of Maureen’s prayer already. Can you take it further?

### **Space for note-taking:**



*A1*

*a story of justice*

## ***Christmas Eve (watchnight)***

***Exodus 1:15-22***

*The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 'When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.' The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, 'Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?'*

*The midwives answered Pharaoh, 'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.'*

*So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.*

*Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: 'Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.' (NIV)*

... *they let the boys live* ...

If Alex had been able to break free of the bonds which were holding him so tightly, the boy would have leapt from his child seat and pressed his nose against the window of his mum's car. The reason for this seven-year-old's overwhelming glee was the presence of a vintage Ford Capri smoothly overtaking them on the dual carriageway. His grandpa had owned one (green, it was) and a fading photograph of the legendary vehicle took pride of place on little Alex's bedside table.

"It's *amazing!*" he sighed. "Can you overtake it, Mum? Please. I want to see it again."

But it was not to be, for the two lanes had dwindled down to one. All prospect of recapturing the Capri had vanished. Then, at the next roundabout, the car indicated left: "Look, Alex: it's heading on to the A1."

Alex's brow furrowed in a quizzical sort of way. "What's the A1?"

"It's a road," replied Mum.

"Why does a road get to be called 'A1'?"

"Well ... 'A' is an important letter and '1' is an important number, so I suppose that makes the A1 an important road."

"But what's so important about a stupid road?"

"This road takes traffic from Edinburgh in the north to London in the south. And back again, of course. But here's the thing: we just don't know where that car might be going, do we? Maybe to visit the King and Queen in Buckingham Palace ... or perhaps just to a friend's house. You never know where a road might lead ... or what the journey might hold for you."

With Alex's dream vehicle now gone for ever, Mum carried on straight ahead. She knew that the missing essentials for Christmas dinner could all be found in a nearby supermarket, big enough to stock all the items they would need though not so huge that they would be there for hours of pointless trawling through offerings neither needed nor wanted.

Alex strained one last time hoping to spot the Ford as it vanished away, then posed his mum a difficult question: "How did Mary and Joseph manage to find Bethlehem? Did they have donkey satnav?"

Mum chuckled at the thought. “No, they didn’t have donkey satnav, Alex, though I bet they could have done with it. Back in those days things were very different, with no proper roads and all sorts of dangers along the way.”

“Dangers???” cried her son, always keen to dig deep into a spot of jeopardy.

“Well, yes. There could have been wild animals who wanted to gobble them up. They might even have been attacked by bandits in the desert or bullied by Roman soldiers in the towns. And what about all the December rain and snow? Being soaked to the skin on a big trek like that could have made Mary and Joseph really unwell. And that would have been horrible.”

“I never thought of that,” mused Alex. “Mary would have been worried, with the baby inside her about to be born and everything. Not very nice for her, eh Mum?”

“Not very nice at all, Alex. When I had you, it was in a nice clean hospital close to home. Twenty minutes in a car (with Dad driving far too fast) and there we were with all those wonderful doctors and nurses and midwives ...”

“Midwives?” interrupted the inquisitive boy. “What are midwives?”

“Oh, midwives are *great!* They’re very special people whose big, big job is to help babies arrive safe and sound. Your midwife was brilliant: Sarah, her name was. She stayed with us right the way through and helped us in all sorts of ways, guiding me through all that I had to deal with, and doing her best to keep Dad from passing out. And when you were born, she just said: ‘There we are – your handsome new son.’”

There was a long pause while Alex processed everything that Mum had just said.

“So ...” he started. “If midwives are so important, why are there no midwives in the Christmas story, coz there aren’t. You’ve got Mary and Joseph ... you’ve got shepherds and angels ... you’ve got wise men and King Harold ...”

“That’s Herod,” corrected Mum, gently.

“... but no midwives. *Or* midhusbands. Not one.”

“Isn’t that odd?” pondered Mum, realising this had never occurred to her before. “These days, new mums get lots of help with their baby, but back then things would have been really tough. All we know is that the baby Jesus ended up in some animals’ feeding trough, with or without a midwife. I really hope someone was there to help Mary. But, like you say, it’s not in the story, is it?”

Now it was Mum's turn to stop speaking and do a bit of silent processing. Would she tell her young son? Or would she wait until he was just a wee bit older? In the end, she decided it was the right thing to do.

"Alex," she said, the sound of his name alone showing that things were turning pretty serious. "It's a fact of life that lots of women have their babies without much help. Even today, there just aren't enough midwives in the world, so there are places where having a baby can be really hard, especially if the mum is very young."

"Like Mary?" asked the boy.

"Just like Mary." said Mum. "Every birth should have a midwife. But not all do, so instead of being a happy event, birth can be a big danger for mums and for babies."

"But Mum, *that's just wrong*. All babies should be safe ... don't you think?"

"Yes, I do Alex," said Mum, pleased at her son's passion. "I really, really do."

"Well," said the boy, hatching a clever plan on the spur of the moment, "maybe we should do what we can to make things better."

"And maybe we should!" agreed Mum, full of enthusiasm, keen to support her son in his good idea. "There are bound to be charities that help with that kind of stuff."

"But where would they be? Where could we find these charities?"

"I'm really not sure, to be honest, Alex. Maybe in London. Or Edinburgh, perhaps?"

"*In London or Edinburgh?*" squealed the little boy, now inspired. "Let's get on to that A1 right now!"

"Well," said Mum with a quiet giggle to herself, not wanting to pour cold water on a red hot idea, "we *could* do that, but even if we took the A1, it's nearly teatime and all the charities' offices will be closing for the night. Instead, why don't we go on the internet when we get home and find a good charity that is helping mums and babies around the world? Then we'll send them a donation."

"It's a deal," said Alex.

And a very fine deal it will be, thought Mum to herself with a big smile and a small but significant nod of her head. Her little boy had spotted for himself a glint of light at Christmas.

### ***Pause for pondering:***

1. Picture Mary on the rocky road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, contemplating what was to come next for herself and her baby. Can you list some of the fears and anxieties that might have passed through her mind?
2. First in the book of Exodus, then in Matthew's gospel we encounter wicked rulers who value personal power and greed over the lives of tiny infants. What might these stories teach us about human nature?
3. Have you ever been challenged by a young child's passion for justice and, if so, how did you respond?
4. Maternity services in countries of the economically developed northern world can be vastly different from those available in the south. How should that disparity make us feel as we look towards the coming of the Child in the cattle trough?

### **Space for note-taking:**



# *Orion the Hunter*

*a story of wonder*

## **Christmas Eve (all-age)**

## **Psalm 8**

*Lord, our Lord,*

*how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*You have set your glory*

*in the heavens.*

*Through the praise of children and infants*

*you have established a stronghold against your enemies,*

*to silence the foe and the avenger.*

*When I consider your heavens,*

*the work of your fingers,*

*the moon and the stars,*

*which you have set in place,*

*what is mankind that you are mindful of them,*

*human beings that you care for them?*

*You have made them a little lower than the angels*

*and crowned them with glory and honour.*

*You made them rulers over the works of your hands;*

*you put everything under their feet:*

*all flocks and herds,*

*and the animals of the wild,*

*the birds in the sky,*

*and the fish in the sea,*

*all that swim the paths of the seas.*

*Lord, our Lord,*

*how majestic is your name in all the earth! Amen. (NIV)*

*... When I consider ...*

**A**mos, the old shepherd, launched a finger up to the evening sky, scanning the heavens as best he could, looking for his life-long companions: the stars in the heavens above. He wanted to point out a simple yet impressive constellation to Micah, his little grandson – one that would grasp the boy’s attention, sparking his excitement in the wondrous ways of the untamed universe. This was the old man’s dream: to take the child from those familiar, mundane places of the ordinary and the everyday, and lift him up in his imagination to unseen vistas of eternity which occupied the realms of a clear winter’s night.

“Let me see now,” pondered the old man as his failing eyes did their utmost to confound his precious plan. “If I am not mistaken, over there you will find three of the skies’ brightest stars edging their way downward in a sloping line of sheer, uninterrupted beauty.”

The little boy edged his head towards his grandfather’s chin, until the old man’s whiskers began tickling his ear. Looking up, he squinted off and away into the bounds of velvet space.

“I see them, Grandpa! I see them! They look like a tiny little candle in the hugeness of the dark night’s sky.”

“Good boy!” he exclaimed, delighted that the little one was fixing his attention upon the task of discovery. “Now, take that candle of stars and use your mind’s eye to turn it into a tight leather belt wrapped securely around the waist of an archer’s body?”

“A belt like what we might wear around a tunic?” he asked.

“Just so. This belt is nothing less than the belt of Orion the Hunter. He positions himself, one leg forward, the other set back for support. In his right hand he wields a heavy stick to guard against lions and wolves and bears. In his other hand there is a curved bow for hunting his prey. Some might say he keeps a short-sword set upon that belt in case he needs extra protection.”

“I see the belt, Grandpa. And I make out the legs which bend beneath him. His arms too, with club and bow. And, yes, now the short-sword also. Yet arms and legs and weapons are not enough. Where is Orion’s body?”

“He is an athlete, this hunter,” smiled Amos, knowingly. “Move up from his belt and there you will find his chest, robustly clad in a breast plate.”

“But Grandpa,” asked the little one, “your Orion is no more than starlight seen through the dark curtain of the night’s sky – a story character made up by you for me to enjoy.”

“Well might you say this, child, yet I am not alone in scanning the heavens for figures ... and for understanding too. Greeks before us, Egyptians, Babylonians and more have found for themselves this hunter up above their heads, observing his journeys for thousands upon thousands of years.”

The lad fell silent as he thought of the generations of keen stargazers from all across the known world who had looked and seen and named the hunter of the skies. So many stars above. So many civilisations. Yet each one had picked out this figure, no doubt with the support of a parent or grandparent just like Amos.

Just then Micah paused as a further thought struck him unexpectedly.

“Grandpa,” he said. “You are a man and I am a boy. And this hunter? Is he like us too? Or could this figure be a girl?”

“Most certainly!” laughed the old man. “Consider Hannah. Your sister excels with bow and arrow, does she not?”

“Sadly, she has hit the bullseye many more times than I ever have. But she is five years older, and one day I’ll show her.”

“Aye, and maybe you will, Micah. Maybe you will. (If you practise hard.)”

“But Grandpa, why would watchers of the night bother themselves with these shapes in the heavens?”

“They go to the trouble of looking and seeing – of finding and mapping – for this reason: that in giving their minds the freedom to roam across space, they trust they will arrive at a truer understanding of the galaxies of which they themselves are but a minuscule part. Perhaps they are struck by their own sense of place within the great puzzle of the cosmos.”

“So by turning our eyes to the night,” mused Micah, “we too might come to see more than just the moon, the stars, the planets?”

“Ah yes,” answered his grandfather. “That is how the universe works for inquiring minds. If we look at the things of this world, all the food, the many garments, the jewels and trinkets, we find ourselves caught up in nothing more than petty, selfish desires. Only the wise delight in looking for meaning beyond their mortal frame.”

“So where are we to start if we really want to *see*?”

“We start, my child, by turning our heads and our minds ... up. We see the constellations, and we name them with stories to go with those names. Then we choose to journey with Mystery and Wonder, our new and valued friends. Before long, the whole blessed firmament is transformed into an infinite stage with a cast of characters conjuring a tale: Orion just there, as we have seen ... the plough nearby ... Canis Major, that big dog who stands on his four sturdy legs ... Lyra, the simple yet beautiful harp of the skies. Then comes a greater quest: a pilgrimage for what we might call “the numinous”. It is said that invisible truth is concealed behind a veil of unknowing as thin as any snowflake. Find heaven’s veil, child. Lift that veil and see more wonders than ever seemed possible to earth-bound eyes.”

“And that sound, Grandpa?” he asked.

“Sound, you say? What sound?”

“Why, Grandpa, are you now so deaf that you cannot hear the sweet music from the skies?”

As if in a trance, slowly and steadily the old man cranked his neck first left then right before raising himself to his feet. Then, cupping a shepherd’s strong hand around his better ear, he listened intently for all he was worth. A moment later, the lad saw tears forming in the eyes of the wise shepherd he knew so well.

“They are on their way, Micah.”

“On their way?” echoed the boy, sensing himself to be on the verge of some wild discovery.

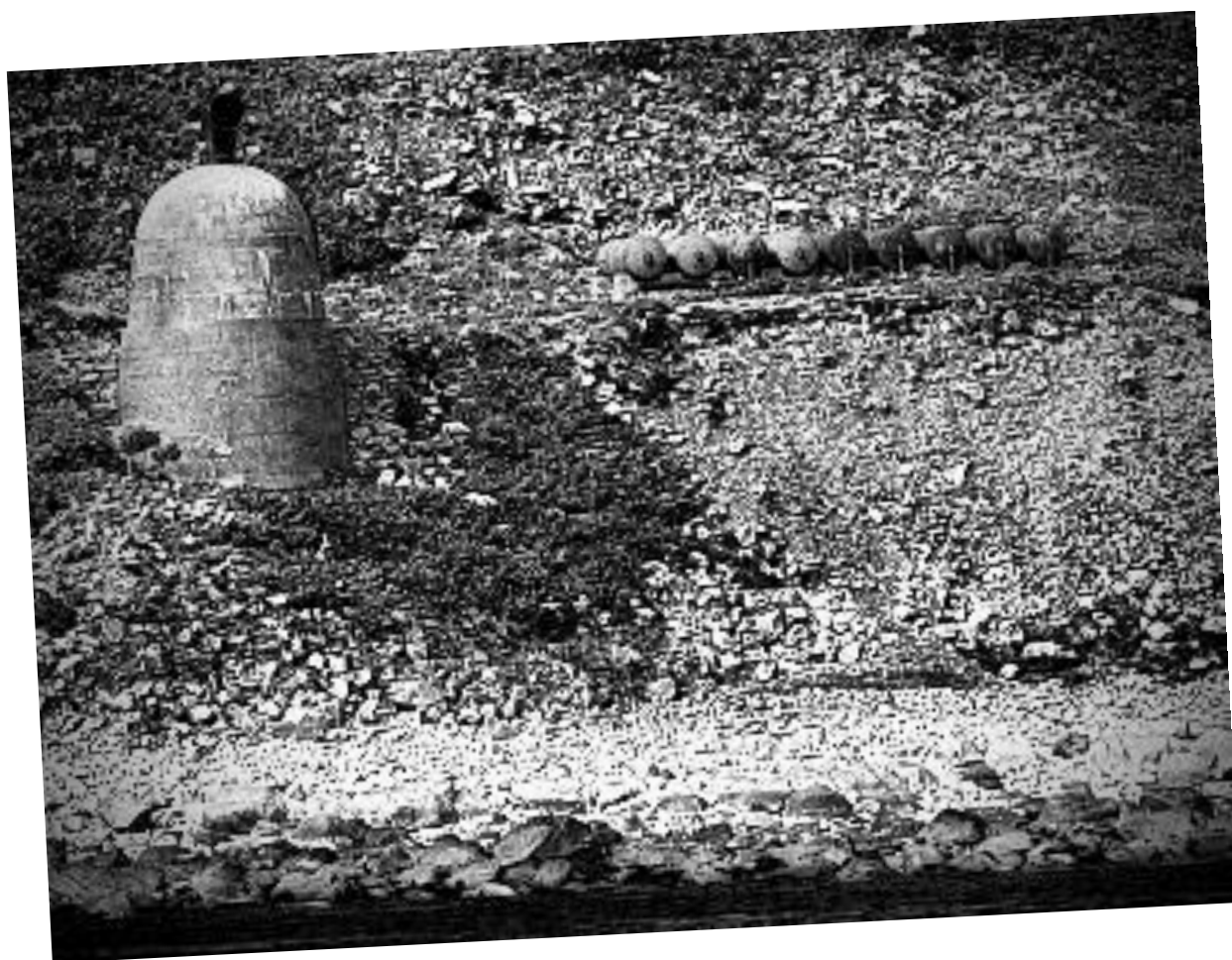
“Who is coming?”

Glancing down at the boy, old Amos enfolded him in a strong and gentle arm, clasping his grandson to himself. “The angels ... angels who come from heaven this night. Messengers of God, Micah. Heralds of a new dawn.”

## ***Pause for pondering:***

1. In Psalm 8 the writer considers “the heavens”? Do you make time to pause and reflect on the glory of all that lies above us ... around us ... within us?
2. In what situations are you most forcibly struck by your own “sense of place”?
3. What do you imagine the shepherds over those Bethlehem plains seeing and hearing that first Christmas night?
4. Amos the shepherd is passionate about introducing Mica to his old friends, the constellations. When, if ever, have you introduced another person to the reality of mystery or wonder?

## **Space for note-taking:**



# *Torkelsey Light*

*a story of distance*

## *Christmas Day*

## *Isaiah 41:4-10*

*Who has done this and carried it through,  
calling forth the generations from the beginning?  
I, the Lord – with the first of them  
and with the last – I am he.’*

*The islands have seen it and fear;  
the ends of the earth tremble.  
They approach and come forward;  
they help each other  
and say to their companions, ‘Be strong!’*

*The metalworker encourages the goldsmith,  
and the one who smooths with the hammer  
spurs on the one who strikes the anvil.  
One says of the welding, ‘It is good.’  
The other nails down the idol so that it will not topple.*

*‘But you, Israel, my servant,  
Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
you descendants of Abraham my friend,  
I took you from the ends of the earth,  
from its farthest corners I called you.  
I said, “You are my servant”;  
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.  
So do not fear, for I am with you;  
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you and help you;  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (NIV)*

... *they help each other* ...

**H**owie, Shiner and the lad had been working their keepers' socks off on their rocky island home the last few, harsh weeks of 1953. As the year neared its end, with darkness over the face of the deep, the tending of the Torkelsey Light meant constant discipline. It had been a tough month with storm upon storm rolling in from north and from west with the express intention of battering that tenacious little lighthouse and its bold inhabitants. On odd days of calm, these keepers would be out clearing the flotsam and jetsam strewn all around: dead birds, broken fishing nets, planks of wood branded with what looked like Russian lettering no-one could read. And then? More bad weather bringing more unwanted trash thundering in upon the waves to lodge beneath the ugly, ancient foghorn.

What a keeper hated most of all about winter turbulence was the uncertainty. And this December had brought it, with their supply vessel, *Maid of Stromness*, due to arrive yet nowhere to be seen. And although there was no risk of outright starvation, the prospect of emergency rations was far from enticing. Who, after all, longed to see in the festivities with the breaking of a ship's biscuit?

The winter solstice came and went sadly, with no supply vessel. But on Christmas Eve the two off-duty keepers awakened to the flat calm of a still day. As the lad made the best of his four scant hours of sleep, Howie and Shiner took the air on their quarter acre of rocky crag. "All being well, we'll see her tomorrow, Shiner. Weather permitting, as they say."

"Aye, chief, and not a moment too soon. Fresh eggs and bacon, eh? Even as I speak, their gentle scent fills the nose of my imagination."

"Well," smiled the principal keeper, "here's hoping. I can tell the lad's pining for word from Betty with news of the wee bairns. He puts on a brave face, but he's struggling, poor soul."

Sure enough, late morning of Christmas Day saw the good ship *Maid of Stromness* puffing her weary way up to the jetty to offload a most precious cargo: food, water, a new tarpaulin, various lighthouse-related components. There was also a neat little pile of parcels on deck – three of them – all wrapped and bowed, ready for opening.

The keepers manhandled their supplies up the carved stone steps into their quarters, with the rest of the afternoon spent sorting the pantry, as salt beef and pickled herring went one way and wheels of cheese and packets of digestive biscuits went another. Then, their work

complete, the lad was dispatched to serve up “a proper brew” from their huge brown enamel teapot, while Howie eyed the presents with the keenness of any 10-year-old.

“I’m telling you Shiner, for the lad it’ll be a tough first Christmas offshore.”

“Aye, I ken,” nodded his second in command. “I’m heart sore for the boy.”

Back came their junior colleague with brimming mugs of tar-like tea sweetened with condensed milk, plus Tunnock’s Caramel Logs whose arrival was to be celebrated (though whose lifespan would prove short).

Then Howie dived excitedly into a sack marked “Merry Christmas from the Commissioners of Northern Lighthouses”. He could hardly contain himself: “Dundee cake ... a wee wooden crate of tangerines (proper festive, that) ... a bottle of raspberry cordial ... these lovely peppermint creams in a tin, no less. And look: *three* boxes of Jaffa Cakes – smashing! And so, gentlemen, to our gifts from home.”

Those three grown men grabbed at their respective parcels. Shiner was first to tear into the wrapping paper: beneath lay a full collection of the *Press & Journal* for almost a whole month, saved for him by his mother. “The papers *at last!*” he roared in triumph. “News and features! Crosswords and letters to the editor! Thank you mum! What a star you are.”

And with that he lifted a newspaper from the top of the pile, and donned his specs.

Howie was next in line. Under the wrapping lay a card from Jennie, his wife of 40 years, and beneath that a solid wooden box finished in fine red leather. “Aye now, just as I had hoped for,” he nodded, thoughtfully. “Back safe and sound once more!”

He unclipped the box lid and found his prized concertina, bright and shiny despite its age, now returned after its five-yearly servicing in Edinburgh. Working his nimble fingers up and down the scales and arpeggios, he smiled in satisfaction.

Last to go was the lad. Within his parcel he found a thick winter sweater knitted by Betty. And lodged inside its navy folds was a framed studio photograph of Peter, their smiling son, and baby Ann, asleep in her big brother’s embrace. For the first time in days, the lad found himself grinning, and widely.

“I miss them so, so much,” he declared with heroic truthfulness.

He hurriedly put on his new sweater then stood proudly before the admiring eyes of his two friends.

“Very fine indeed!” admired Shiner, peering over his newspaper. “As it turns out, other people are lonely this time of year, just like us. Listen to what the Queen’s been saying, all the way over in New Zealand!”

And raising his *P&J* once more, he read: “Of course, we all want our children at Christmas time – for that is the season above all others when each family gathers at its own hearth.”

The paper fell into Shiner’s lap as he added: “There, you see? You ... and Her Majesty, far from family, missing the bairns.” And the lad nodded pensively.

Just then the pair heard the haunting sound of a Hebridean melody filling the air. Howie’s newly revived concertina was enjoying its first outing in a long time with a song penned in the lonely watches of the night by the musician himself:

*When I think on the miles that would keep us apart,  
and I stare at the darkest of skies,  
and I sit and I wonder and worry and fret,  
finding tears welling up in my eyes;  
that’s when I give thanks for the life which we share –  
with a love that can make our hearts ache.  
Here’s a gift, oh so simple, yet simply divine,  
with a strength which the miles cannot break.*

*Nor distance, nor doubt, nor denial nor death  
could ever destroy our sweet love,  
for the heartbeats we share are above human care.  
It’s a gift sent from heaven above.  
Yes, our love comes from heaven above.*

“Aye, chief,” sighed the young husband and father as the final chord vanished away into silence, “that’s an awful bonnie wee song, and its sweetness is enough to break me completely. But instead I think I’ll just let it build me up ... if it wants to.”

“Good lad,” nodded the chief. “It’s hard – grindingly hard – when loved ones are apart. But still the light will shine brightly. (We know it will.) Which is just to say that Shiner and I ... we know. We know what it is to be a lighthouse keeper far from our nearest and dearest. We know the pain which has no way around it – only a single way through. And we know there are those in high places (very high places indeed) who know it too. Merry Christmas, lad. Merry Christmas to you ... and yours.”

## ***Pause for pondering:***

1. In Isaiah 41 we find a picture of people who need to take courage as they group together to provide mutual care and support. How do the three lighthouse keepers do the same?
2. What makes Christmas such a powerful magnifying glass for both festive cheer and seasonal sadness?
3. What are the costs and benefits of helping others with sensitive situations such as Christmas separation and loneliness?
4. When Howie speaks of “very high places indeed” he might have meant the Queen ... but what if he was thinking even higher?

## **Space for note-taking:**



# *Tear and Share*

*a story of invitation*

## ***Sunday after Christmas***

***Mark 7:1-8***

*The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)*

*So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, 'Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?'*

*He replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:*

*“These people honour me with their lips,*

*but their hearts are far from me.*

*They worship me in vain;*

*their teachings are merely human rules.”*

*You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.’ (NIV)*

... *merely human rules* ...

**T**he Property Convener scratched his head in a befuddled sort of way: “Isn’t that the starting line-up for the Italian rugby team?”

The Twelve Old Men of the Kirk Session chortled with knowing mirth.

“No, Murdo,” replied The Session Clerk, “that is the list of all those daft, over-priced coffees: latte ... ristretto ... cappuccino ... macchiato.”

“These Italians!” piped up The Treasurer indignantly. “They must be millionaires, the amount they charge for a teeny, tiny cup of coffee. And so many choices! In Scotland we have black and we have white (with or without sugar). And that’s all we’ve had to worry about for generations. A good old jar of instant coffee powder and a tin of economy teabags have always been sufficient for this church.”

“Actually, Bruce, you raise a good point there,” intervened Bella, the recently ordained minister of St Matthew’s, a once thriving city centre church. “Just like society as a whole, coffee has changed a lot in a short space of time. We have before us tonight a business proposal that would transform our old bookshop next door into a brand new coffee shop – capable of breathing new life into our community, while raising our profile no end ... and – let us not forget – giving this congregation a much-needed financial lifeline.”

Arguments over the proposed lease continued long into the night ... without, it should be said, a coffee break. Finally, it was decided on a 6-5 vote (with one abstention) to go ahead with the ambitious plan. The coffee shop plan was one step closer to becoming a reality.

“And they call it innovation,” moaned The Treasurer. “Mark my words: we’re dooomed!”

All permissions duly received, it didn’t take long for keys to be handed over to the new tenants: Bryan (with a Y), Tess (with a wolfhound named Deirdre) and someone who claimed to be called “Storm” (with, *of all things*, a pierced eyebrow, if you please). They wasted no time in gutting the dark old space in preparation for a fresh start. Out went the black metal shelving and in came mismatched tables and chairs scattered liberally across the now gaudily painted floorboards. Mustard-coloured walls were transformed with a good many layers of matt emulsion (brilliant white), while ceiling lights illuminated revolutionary posters from around the world, including one of Che Guevara looking ready for a supersized bucket of oat-milk latte.

All this was as intriguing as it was concerning, thought The Twelve Old Men.

Soon the premises were ready. Social media were pressed into service, with printed fliers for *Cinnamon Junction* handed out in person to homes and businesses in the vicinity, potential customers being invited to taste and see. Opening its doors in the cooler days of autumn, the cafe immediately attracted customers like caffeine-deprived bees to a coffeepot. Bryan, Tess and Storm worked hard to offer a place of welcome which their customers immediately made their own – a place of real belonging, no matter their visitors’ backgrounds or lifestyles. There was a weekly babyccino morning for parents and toddlers, an afternoon book group, poetry readings and regular jazz nights, all organised by willing customers and enjoyed by first-timers from across the cafe’s ever-widening hinterland.

But over the weeks to come not many of the developments were looked upon with admiration by The Twelve Old Men, one of whom had had quite enough: “When Miss Edith Duthie left us an *extremely* handsome bequest, we knew it was to be used for building and running a theological bookshop for (and I quote), ‘the edification of the masses in the ways of Christ’. But look at it now with those hairy beatniks in charge. If the sainted Miss Duthie were alive to see it ... Hmph!”

On the third Sunday morning in November The Congregational Roll-Keeper counted more people in the coffee shop than in the pews. “I even spotted the minister with a hot chocolate – the huge sort with whipped cream and marshmallows and a flake and what have you. It was sufficient to make me drop my digestive biscuit, so startled was I at the very sight of it all.”

By the start of Advent the cafe was decorated: conifer in the corner, fairy lights strung and pinecones strewn. With the season of goodwill fast approaching, Tess came up with a great idea: a users’ group made up of the three partners, plus Bella and five keen customers. Together they would come up with ideas for making the cafe outward-looking and engaged with its community and the wider world. Their first decision was easy: a “pay it forward” scheme where those who could afford to buy a cuppa could fund coffees for those who couldn’t. Many a customer would willingly fork out extra, with the business adding one percent of its profits in support of the cause. The team also agreed to start selling packs of their fairly-traded coffee at the till, proceeds being used to help build a school in Central America run by a growers’ collective. These plans were lapped up by the loyal clientele who valued the benefits presented by building community, whether close to home or far away.

“It’s nothing but a great big hullabaloo,” muttered The Session Clerk under his breath, as he pushed his way through the cafe’s Sunday lunchtime queue which had “snaked-its-unbidden-way-across-the-front-steps-of-the-church-I’ll-have-you-know. “Nothing but a nonsense ... and a public nuisance to boot. *Oh, no doubt about it!*”

On “Nine Lessons and Carols Sunday” a strange thing happened. At the end of the service, Bella told the congregation that “the usual” Christmas shortbread would not be available at coffee-time. Instead there would be something a little different. “Whatever next?”, chorused the voices inside the heads of The Twelve Old Men. But still they went along, nursing their silent condemnation for all it was worth. “What *was* St Matthew’s Kirk coming to???”

As the congregation made their way to the hall they found no plates of Presbyterian shortbread. Rather, there were rows of white cake boxes marked “Tear and Share”. Standing over them was Storm, clad in his coffee-themed Christmas jumper, smiling broadly at everyone as they made their wary approach. He opened box after box to reveal warm and yeasty cinnamon rolls, each one nestled into its neighbour, and all glistening with Scandinavian perfection. Together they held gooey softness and audible crispness in perfect tension, with festive spices rising up like incense sublime.

“Look,” groaned one of The Elders, “we are instructed first to ‘tear’ ... and then to ‘share’.”

“Instructed?” queried his colleague. “I am minded, on balance, to take this as an invitation.”

And so, the deed was done. And in the breaking of that rather remarkable bread, a change took place. With roughly-torn cinnamon rolls and bowls of Philadelphia frosting for spooning and slurping, an aged and rather flustered congregation got into a bit of a mess on that festive Sunday morning: a mess of sticky fingers and frosted lips; a mess of smiles and chuckles.

And – who would believe it? – a mess of keen adventure and childlike fun. And through it all there was a sense that they had been moved in unexpected directions and in new ways, perhaps as never before. The feast had fed them, and in more ways than one.

Meanwhile, far, far above them all, the sainted Miss Edith Duthie was bumping into her good friend, St Matthew, who had a question for her: “So, Edie,” he smiled, “what do you make of your theological bookshop being turned into a community cafe?”

“Hey,” she grinned in the laidback way that saints so often do. “I’m cool with it, Matt. The kids are bound to come round to the idea of selling good books along with great coffee. And as for the old guard of the congregation, my guess is that those heavenly cinnamon rolls will start to work their magic soon. ... *Very* soon.”

## ***Pause for pondering:***

1. In Mark 7, why does Jesus attack the Pharisees so aggressively for the attitudes they hold?
2. Do you admire Bella? Or do you rather pity her? Whatever your answer, what are your reasons?
3. What are the potential benefits and risks faced by churches who cherish long-held memories and values from past generations?
4. How might congregations work more actively with people in the community who, while not Christians themselves, often show in their own living a true sense of Jesus' ways ... Jesus' vision ... Jesus' adventurous journeying?

**Space for note-taking:**



# ***Rough-hewn***

***a story of striding***

## ***Epiphany***

***Luke 9:43b-51***

*While everyone was marvelling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men." But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.*

*An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest."*

*"Master," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us."*

*"Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."*

*As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Amen. (NIV)*

... *Jesus resolutely set out* ...

The Rev Charlotte Bilston opened the huge metal gate for her probationer, Mhairi Sayers, as they set out on their woodland walk: “So then, what’s the topic for our first stroll of the new year? Advent excitement? Christmas exhaustion? Resolutions worth making (and breaking by the last week of January)?”

“If it's OK by you,” replied Mhairi, “I’d like us to chat about a festive thought I was e-mailed on New Year’s Day. It’s quite short but I’ve had it on my mind for days now.”

“Sounds good!” nodded Charlotte with a note of expectation. “Something thought-provoking, and seasonal too. Let’s hear it.”

And so the pair made their way along the frosty path ahead of them, enjoying the chill of the air and the diluted beams of light upon their faces.

Taking her phone from her pocket, Mhairi began to read:

*Once it's over we pack up the trinkets of glittering celebration and return to grey-old wintry life, the shoe-boxed manger figures redundant for another year.*

*Into the box go shepherds, whose faith has led them from sheepfold to Bethlehem inn, then far and wide across the neighbourhood with stunning good news for all.*

*Into the box go wise men of the East, whose travels have taken them far with truth-laden gifts both sacred and sombre.*

*Into the box go a new mum and her man, whose courage has been there for all to see: bemused ... confused ... exhilarated ... exhausted ... yet trekking on in the strangest of directions, seeking asylum from their own hate-filled monarch.*

*And last of all the manger itself and its tiny, precious cargo. But surely not. To stow away the child, out of sight and out of mind? That should never be.*

*No! The rough-hewn babe needs his place of honour, in full view of everyone, January to December. And behind that child his towering cross, symbol not of earthly oppression ... but of dazzling hope.*

*Christmas and Easter ... hand in hand ... indivisible.*

In line with their standard routine, the spoken thought was followed by five minutes or so of silent walking, as each got into their stride, every step a gentle metronome beat which served to soften the mind and open before them wonderful avenues of contemplation.

Mhairi loved their walks through the woods. It was a great way to chat with a boss who over no more than a few months had become a mentor and an assessor, then a trusted companion on a journey of common discovery. On these country rambles they might wander into familiar conversational territory, covering the many challenges of ministry and the parish. Or they might get a little more meditative, like today.

Charlotte also enjoyed the opportunity to spend an hour or two in the great outdoors with a recent theology graduate who was filled with fresh thinking, overflowing with vigour and more than a few great ideas. After all, an old minister should always find ways to stay young.

When the pair had got together at the start of Mhairi's probationary period, their "solemn pact" to stroll and reflect side by side had seemed reasonable enough. Back then, the weather had been warm and fair. Half a year on, in the depths of early January, outdoor supervision sessions seemed a bit more of a daunting prospect, though still they walked.

There was a quietness between them as they made their way along the path which crackled beneath their cross-rhythmed treads. Each woman felt she was sharing in a special time-out – perhaps even a holy space of sorts. Nature's quietness helped their discussions to coalesce seamlessly into something intimate and special, as they took in the blue majesty of the skies above and the gentle scent of fallen pine cones lying on the carpet of purest white ranged all around.

After a while, the couple paused at their viewpoint bench under cover of Scots pine branches arrayed in their gentle greens and browns. The vista before them led the eye downward past castle mound and frozen burn to the far-distant golf links and the shimmering sea beyond. Always beautiful, thought Charlotte. Always special.

Refreshed by sights and sounds both far and near, Mhairi gathered her thoughts: "I've read and re-read that reflection so many times now. I think it's right about how we put away the figures from the Christmas stories; they play their part on a table or a mantelpiece, only to get boxed up and unceremoniously packed away."

"Probably no bad thing," chuckled Charlotte. "If the pageantry of Christmas ran on much past Epiphany we'd all be dead on our feet. Yes, it's a wonderful time of year, but just so exhausting! Once those boxes are put back in their attic space or spare room cupboard every minister, every priest, should take time out to recharge their spiritual batteries – and in beautiful places like this."

Mhairi quietly leant forward on the bench as pensively she looked down at the untouched frost on the stones by her feet. “I get what you’re saying. And I understand that ‘Christmas comes but once a year’ and so on. But all through my life I’ve felt such a huge emptiness after the big day. Time for turkey sandwiches and left-over trifle as the family watches *The Sound of Music* yet again. It’s as though everything ... I don’t know ... just evaporates into nothingness.”

“But does it?” challenged her supervisor. “Does it really, Mhairi?”

The phone which had been tucked into her coat pocket was taken out once more as Mhairi returned to the e-mail: “Stunning good news from shepherds ... truth-laden gifts from wise men ... courage in the shape of a young Mary and her Joseph ... and then that rough-hewn babe. What’s it all saying? Some faith manifesto, perhaps?”

“Or better still,” said Charlotte, “a set of signposts, each one there to point us on through the sadness of this world to God’s dream for all Creation.”

A silent reverie fell upon the pair as they stepped out into the vivid light of a most sacred day, strolling from sun-dappled path to rickety bridge and up into the conifer woods still laden with last night’s fall of pristine snow.

“Hearing those words out loud,” said Mhairi, “helps me understand. Yes, the characters do get bundled up. Yes, there’s an emptiness in January after the fulness of December. But it’s not an ending. It’s *never* an ending, is it? We might put the manger child behind us, but before we know it we’ll be heading up the road to Galilee in search of the adult Jesus, ready to change the world. If Christmas inspires us, then the message of the Nativity scene can also be the stimulus we need to live a grown-up faith free of tinsel, as we head on to the Cross and the stone rolled away.”

“Christmas and Easter ... hand in hand,” mused Charlotte. “That’s such a special image for a new minister to carry around in her head and on her heart, deep inside. Incarnation and Resurrection: two sides of one single coin, minted together by God. Safe ... sure ... and ... what’s the word I’m looking for???”

“Indivisible,” smiled her young friend, now just a little older and wiser.

### ***Pause for pondering:***

1. “Advent excitement? Christmas exhaustion?” Where do you stand on these two big topics, noted by Charlotte at the start of the walk?
2. Do you experience any kind of emptiness in early January? If so, how do you handle the challenge of the new year?
3. In what ways might it be appropriate (or inappropriate) to place the rough-hewn baby Jesus in the shadow of the Cross of Calvary?
4. “Incarnation and Resurrection: two sides of one single coin, minted together by God.” Which side of that divine coin speaks to you more powerfully each year?

### **Space for note-taking:**

## A Christmas request

These resources are provided for you free of charge. If you use any of them, whether in churches, schools, homes or other venues, please consider taking up a charitable offering at your congregation's Christmas Eve service to benefit Christian Aid Scotland, which aims with supporters and partners:

- to expose poverty throughout the world;
- to help in practical ways to end it; and
- to highlight, challenge and change the structures and systems that favour the rich and powerful over the poor and marginalised.

Your donation to Christian Aid Scotland can be made at a bank branch (with or without a Christian Aid specific Giro):

<b>Bank:</b>	<b>Lloyds</b>
<b>Name:</b>	<b>Christian Aid Giro Account</b>
<b>Sort code:</b>	<b>30-80-12</b>
<b>Account number:</b>	<b>26218468</b>

If supporters can include in the reference field the church's name (or "OR" reference, if known) this will help in attributing your donation correctly. Or you can send a cheque to the Christian Aid Edinburgh office (again with church name): Christian Aid, Augustine Church, George IV Bridge, Edinburgh EH1 1EL. Thank you!

*This Christmas, in its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, make a difference by playing your part in the on-going work of the UK Churches' international development agency: Christian Aid.*



