Light and Life

story-sermons for

Advent, Christmas and Epiphany

Ponderings and pictures by Robin Hill

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Foreword

The Christian faith is all about stories. And no season is more wrapped up in stories than Christmas, from the angel appearing to Mary to a census-driven journey to Bethlehem, from a star leading Magi bearing gifts to a family's desperate escape to Egypt. And yet those of us who are invited to reflect on these stories year by year often manage to take the story out, replacing it with assertion, explanation, persuasion – and exhaustion in our listeners. Robin Hill, by contrast, tries to put the story back in to Christmas.

Sometimes he takes a Bible story and envisages it in or near our own place and time, as in *Seeing stars* in which there are not one but three good Samaritans on a Scottish winter's night. Or he takes a virtue encouraged by scripture and weaves a story around it, as with love in the moving *Nothing at all*, peace in the jazz-inflected *Swing to enter*, humility in *The kneeler* or forgiveness in the Orkney-set *Dapper Dan*.

As with the best stories, Robin's don't always tell us what to think of his characters. What do we make of the photographer undone by a child's looking straight at him in *Spotted*? Do we too see something missing in George's poem on what Christmas means in *The Alderson bequest*? Why is the skull in *Fernanda's gifts* made of crystal?

But no matter how closely or loosely aligned to the Bible's own narratives, each of Robin's fine tales revolves around the central story of Christmas – or of the Christian faith as a whole – that God came to the world and nothing was ever the same again. That's a story which can never get old.

Rev Dr Donald MacEwan
Chaplain, University of St Andrews

Preface

Three years ago I made available a collection of "story-sermons" for use in church. Under the title of *Illuminating Christmas*, the resources set out to provide worship leaders with preaching pointers at a hectic time of year. The materials were also able to be used in small group discussion and personal devotions throughout the seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. This was followed by *Glimpses of Glory* (2024) and *A Mission of Peace* (2025).

In *Light and Life* you will find four stories covering the Sundays of Advent, two for Christmas Eve, and one each for Christmas Day and the two Sundays following. Every story is close to 1,250 words in length, so could serve as a festive alternative to preaching. If dropped into a service they could be read, for example, by members of the congregation. With more time available, a story could be seen as a starter which might form an introduction to a short biblical or spiritual reflection by the worship leader.

The nine story-sermons in this year's collection cover all sorts of places and spaces from Latin America to Greenland, mediaeval Tuscany to present-day Orkney. And the range of characters is rather broad, taking in a much-loved automotive character from a Great War battlefield; a woman who befalls a dreadful accident on a festive night out; and jazz-loving colleagues who find musical fulfilment in a dingy works basement.

Jump in and take a look: if you find anything that pricks your imagination, feel free to make use of it, adding your own creativity to the delivery of the pieces.

Have fun, and have a Merry Christmas when it comes!

Robin

Rev Dr Robin Hill
East Lothian, October 2026

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

Acknowledgments

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- the Christmas Philatelic Club, whose excellent quarterly journal, *Yule Log*, is a great source of information and insight.

Postal inspiration

From the outset, Christmas stamps have been a source of visual inspiration for this story-sermon project. If you would like to see the stamps which helped spark each one into life, you should be able to search them out on the internet:

The good professor: Republic of Ireland 22p stamp (1985): a red candle burns brightly behind a sprig of holly.

Nothing at all: United Kingdom 25p stamp (1995): a robin sits on a green fence beside a holly bush.

Seeing stars: United Kingdom 50p stamp (2008): a pantomime Captain Hook chuckles menacingly.

Swing to enter: United Kingdom 2nd class stamp (2003): a cool and jazzy ice sculpture by artist Andy Goldsworthy.

Dapper Dan: United Kingdom 1st class stamp (2002): the contrast of spiky green holly leaves and rounded red berries.

The kneeler: Aitutaki 7c stamp (1975): a mediaeval man in flowing red robes stands beside a donkey.

Spotted!: Greenland DKK5.00 and 5.50 stamps (2003): a night scene with a Christmas tree outside a church in Greenland, tiny children wandering by with torches.

The Alderson bequest: United Kingdom 14p stamp (1981): the adult Christ in glory depicted in mosaic.

Fernanda's gifts: Brazil 100+100 Re'is stamp (1939–40): the Wise Men of the East with their three gifts.



The good professor

a story of beginnings

Advent Sunday *John 1:1-14*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NIV)

... that life was the light of all mankind.

Although the thin little academic was very old, the lecture theatre which he inhabited was far older. Angus Arbuthnott Sneddon, Regius Professor of New Testament, had not been around for the foundation of his university in the 15th century, even though many of his students might well have thought so.

A lifelong bachelor of traditional bearing now in his 80s, he had scorned the notion of retiring (notwithstanding the heavy hint offered by the university authorities when they presented him with a gold watch on the occasion of his 75th birthday). Departmental staff members, meanwhile, were only too glad to have him in post and to keep him in post, as long as possible. In any case, "A.A." (as he was universally known) was the loveliest of lecturers who never failed to hand round his "suckable sweeties" at the top of the hour, before taking one for himself on the bag's safe, if depleted, return. Then he would launch into an unscripted discourse that was always tightly argued and never dull.

A cherished feature of the great man's style was his "brief respite" near the middle of a lecture when he would pause to pass on any departmental announcements, before telling a truly dreadful joke. (And, of these, he had many.) But above all, he was simply a magnificent orator of captivating wit.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it being now well past twenty to five, let us round off this lecture by discussing together the merits and wonders of the prologue to the gospel according to St John. This is the closest the entire book comes to being what we might call … "Christmassy". But as you will recognise for yourselves on this cold winter's day with the university's festive conifer twinkling gaily in the West Quadrangle, Christmas is never all that very far away. And I would encourage you (if you are not already asleep) to keep that thought at the forefront of your mind, as we consider the majestic message of this fabled ancient text."

After these words of introduction, the Professor launched into that great Bible passage in the eerily poetic tones of the King James Bible, his eyes firmly closed against all unwanted distraction:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

At this, his eyes flashed open, startling the students out of their late afternoon reverie. A dramatic pause filled the air, allowing everyone in that old lecture theatre to come to terms with the enormity of the moment. Only once he was absolutely sure that each member of his audience had their unblinking eyes fixed upon his own did the professor round off the quotation with John's note of high drama:
And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

Leaning over his robust oak lectern as he had done perhaps 10,000 times before, the ancient Professor Sneddon looked out upon his eager audience afresh, skilfully scooping up every last ounce of their anticipation.

"Friends, based on that portion of John's prologue, I would now warmly invite you to tell me what on earth (or, indeed, what in heaven) is going on in the mind of that writer, penning his thoughts in a pre-scientific age, 2000 years ago. Remember, our discussions are meant to be about fascinating enquiry and collegial learning, so be not afraid! After all, the only daft answer is the answer you keep to yourself!"

The professor's greatest gift was his ability to encourage dialogue among his young and often timid students. This lot, however, were an outgoing bunch, and it didn't take much persuading to get them chatting. Soon, the ideas started to form, until one young man spotted the prof sending a gesture of the eyebrows in his direction.

"Well professor," said Jim, "for me, that passage speaks of supernatural insight. If God is working through the writer, perhaps this text might be seen as a vision *of* heaven … originating *in* heaven. John shows us the emptiness of time and space before the galaxies were, if you will, 'spoken' into being. And the one doing that speaking is the pre-existing deity. The Alpha and the Omega, so to speak."

"I like that, Jim," nodded Professor Sneddon. "You and I will progress this line of reasoning when we reconvene at 5pm in the Staff Club where, as ever, all will be welcome. Now then, your reaction, if you please, to Jim's thoughtful starter."

Clare raised a tentative hand: "Could it be, Professor, that the writer is helping his readers to get an idea of what we might call 'the *real* first appearance of Christ'? It's hard to put into words, but what I'm trying to get at is this: John is concerned with a cosmic dimension, so his timescale takes the reader back far beyond the birth of a baby in a Bethlehem manger. John aims to take on board the nothingness of a Creation that is yet to emerge, "in the beginning". And at the same time this passage is a bit like a science fiction movie, grasping our

imaginations and launching them into unimaginable realms. So, we are brought into the 'all-ness' of God, and into the 'Word-ness' of the Christ who is still to take human form. It's like coming to a realisation of the wisdom of Jesus of Nazareth, only he's there with God the Father in the middle of the void. Along with the Holy Spirit too, come to think of it."

"How *very* interesting, Clare!" cried the old man with boyish enthusiasm. "If we travel back to the opening words of the Old Testament we find it has its own 'In the beginning' text in which 'the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.' And so, it could be argued, we encounter there not merely God, but God *with a purpose*."

"Professor!" came a loud cry from Margaret, a retired science teacher who enjoyed a good academic scrap. "I hear what both James and Clare are saying, but how are we to make sense of all this 'before the creation of the universe' stuff? I mean, isn't the writer working in the arena of pure speculation, without any kind of case to support his wild conjecturing? Or, to put it another way, how on earth can we take seriously the writings of a man from 20 centuries ago who lacked even the most simple grasp of physics? Does modern science count for nothing in this debate?"

"I think," said the old man, "we will invite Jim and Clare to re-enter the fray."

Jim was first to respond. "Yeah, that's a really good point, but I'm thinking *it's not about* the science. It's much more to do with the metaphor and the poetry."

"That's it exactly," joined in Clare. "The poetry of the unknown. The mystery of the unknowable. Our human vocabulary is too weak to contain the wild, roaming truth of God's Spirit, there in the beginning. This is the God who smiles at our feeble efforts when we try to be clever with all our theories and theologies, coming up with concepts like "eternity" and "infinity" and any number of other things which we'll *never* get our heads around. But in the fulness of time God gives us something better than lessons in philosophy. God gives us something to ground our lives upon, as we are brought face to face with heaven on earth in that tiny child in a manger. In the baby Jesus, God's simplicity cuts through our complexity."

"Food for thought, Clare! You have given us much to fuel our imaginations and our conversations! And there, we must end," smiled the good professor. "As I said a little earlier, Christmas is never all that very far away. And now, one and all … it being a gnat's whisker away from five to five … let us adjourn to the Staff Club!"

Pause for pondering:

1. The professor is an old man of youthful exuberance. What does he want from his young students as together they explore the prologue to John's gospel?
2. Looking at Genesis chapter 1, what does Jim mean when he speaks of galaxies being "spoken" into being.
3. Clare tries to articulate the idea of Jesus being present with his heavenly Father at the creation of the universe. Does this resonate with your thinking about God the Son?
4. Margaret, meanwhile, is a scientist who is sceptical of 2000-year-old theology. How might we seek to embrace John's ancient text with our 21st century worldview?

Space for note-taking:



Nothing at all

a story of kindliness

Second Sunday of Advent *Colossians 3:12-17*

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen. (NIV)

... compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

The first time Madge Milliner spotted the sign to Ploverly Hall she pondered what might lie in wait along its winding drive. Stately homes, it should be said, were a long way from Madge's normal experience.

As a young woman in the Second World War she had served as a dispatch rider in the Auxiliary Territorial Service. Then, in 1946, Corporal Marjorie Milliner found herself contemplating life on civvy street. Throughout her six years in uniform the young woman had developed a passion for her motorbike and liked nothing better of a Sunday afternoon than setting about some maintenance with a box of tools and an oily rag. The more Madge thought about it, the more she believed she could make a living from motorbikes. Unable to afford a garage or even a lock-up, she was delighted when her dad handed her the keys of his old and unreliable baker's van, a Morris Commercial. With the help of her brother Thomas – a skilled sign writer – the van took on a fresh identity and a new lease of life in the space of a weekend. And so "Milliner's Mobile Mechanics" was born. Based in the beauty of the English Cotswolds, Madge drove her beloved van with its neatly stowed range of tools and appliances wherever her skills were needed. Over the years, her commitment to excellence of service earned her many appreciative clients in her circuit of small market towns and rural villages.

Arriving at the tradesmen's entrance on a frosty December morning, Madge spotted a tiny robin perched on a chilly-looking railing beside a holly bush with berries glowing red in the harshness of another winter. Drawing on an ancient bell-pull, she heard a distant tinkling, as if from some far off, feudal age. Moments later the clunk of a giant key was followed by the creaking of the great oak door, as slowly it opened to reveal an elderly butler, crisply dressed, his thinned white hair Brylcreemed to within an inch of its life.

"Milliner's Mobile Mechanics. I am to ask for a Mrs Northcote."

"Do come in, Miss. You are expected in the drawing room."

Drawing room? mused Madge. *Whatever have I done to deserve that?*

Off they set, making their way down a maze of drab corridors, followed closely by two dachshunds. As the foursome entered the drawing room, a glowing Christmas tree in its bay window, Madge spotted an elderly lady keeping warm by the fire.

“Miss … Milliner, madam,” the butler trilled, as the hostess rose to greet her.

“Welcome to Ploverly,” she sang. “So good of you to help me with old Harold. He is such a dear, but I fear that the old boy does need a proper inspection.”

Glancing at the butler by her side, a pained expression crossed the mechanic’s face.

“Oh no, silly me! This is Raymond, the last remaining member of our household. The Harold of whom I speak is the motorcycle my late husband George brought back from the war in 1919. When Harold was rolled onto the docks in Portsmouth no-one knew quite what to do with him, so Captain George Northcote of the Royal Corps of Signals had a word with his commanding officer. A few months later George and I were married in this very room, our honeymoon being shared with Harold (an unusual arrangement, I think you will agree!) Then, after his motorcycling years were over, George continued to care for his two-wheeled friend. Alas, my beloved George passed away some six months ago, leaving Harold as the final physical link to the man I loved so truly. Upon my own death, I am relieved to say that a permanent space has been secured for Harold in the Pensworth Transport Museum. But until then I need to know that our motorbike will stay in the same condition which George had worked so hard to maintain over so many years. That’s why I need your help, you see.”

Madge gave Mrs Northcote an understanding smile. “Your Harold will receive the very best of my attention, Mrs Northcote. Of that you can be sure.”

“I know he will! Now, Miss Milliner, Raymond will escort you to the garage where Harold has been in quiet retirement. Once you are finished, we will have a nice cup of tea together and a good chat, you and I.”

Once deposited in the garage, Madge gently lifted the appropriately named dust sheet which shrouded this most precious of possessions, revealing a vintage motorcycle of extraordinary elegance. Harold’s paintwork had been kept pristine, with everything about him as clean and fresh as the day he had rolled out of a Midlands factory decades earlier. Yet one thing troubled Madge: with so much care and attention paid to Harold’s appearance over the years, why had he been kept in the dark seclusion of a musty garage, unridden by friends, unseen by neighbours.

As she looked a little deeper, the answer became clear through the discovery of this fault and that failing, whether in chassis or engine, mechanics or electrics. The workload of those Great War years had taken a heavy toll, known to Captain Northcote, though not, it seemed, to his wife. The good Captain had done well with his paint and polish, yet no surface beauty could ever hope to mask the reality of a motorbike whose active life was undeniably over.

“Let me just wipe away those cobwebs,” Madge whispered kindly. A good wash and brush up and you’ll look quite the hero when I’m done with you.”

After reassembling the motorbike with care, and polishing each surface to a gleam, Madge looked around to check no-one was looking before giving Harold a gentle pat on the saddle. His dust sheet safely back in place, the mechanic’s skilled hands thoroughly washed and dried, she found her way to the drawing room once more.

Stepping smartly up to her client she smiled broadly. “Mrs Northcote, I come to report back,” she declared in a voice glowing with military precision. “I can honestly tell you that in my expert opinion there is not a single thing I could do to make your Harold any better than he already is.”

“Oh, how simply marvellous!” chimed the old lady in delight.

Soon, the tea was flowing freely as motorbike stories were enjoyed, along with sandwiches and sausage rolls, mince pies and Christmas cake. Then, as Raymond cleared the cups and plates, Madge reached into her kit bag and pulled out a diary.

“What I would like to suggest, Mrs Northcote, is this: for a precious treasure such as Harold we really should keep a watchful eye on him. Should I come back, say, 12 months from now?”

A date was set for the following year and – as events turned out – for a further 15 years in a row. With each passing visit there would be a swift and entirely needless inspection of Harold, and a comprehensive polish, always ending with a gentle hug. Then the women would chat, mainly about a blissfully happy couple from the 1920s and their motorised companion. And when at last the time would come for Daphne Northcote and Madge Milliner to make their fond farewells for another twelve months, there would follow a simple exchange, very much like this:

“My dear Madge, once more your visit has made an old woman very happy. It really is so good of you to come all this way each Christmas for Harold’s service. Now! You must tell me: how much do I owe you?”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure Daphne. And in any case, Harold is every bit as healthy as the day we first met. Once again, there was nothing at all for me to do, so nothing at all is what you owe me. It’s reward enough, my friend, to see your peace of mind.”

Pause for pondering:

1. Do you have experience of a “final physical link” to a deceased loved one? If so, what is its significance?
2. The author of Colossians writes of how Christians should “clothe” themselves with five different qualities. What might we gain from the image of “putting on” good things as though they are garments from a wardrobe or cloakroom?
3. What does the Bible passage mean when it suggests that the readers should “put on love” over all the previously mentioned attributes?
4. This story hardly embodies the notion of “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”. Can there sometimes be a kindness and a justification in concealing a harsh reality?

Space for note-taking:



Seeing stars

a story of solidarity

Third Sunday of Advent *Luke 10:30-37*

… Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'

The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.'

Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.' Amen. (NIV)

... Go and do likewise.

We will never know exactly what happened in that crowded city street one dark December teatime, so let us simply agree that this story has its origins a needless fight between two hungry teenage lads.

"Hey you! That's *my* curry, by the way!"

"Naw! You ordered the one with the mushrooms, see?"

"But I ordered the chicken, and that's what *you've* got … ya thievin' bandit!"

The tussle which followed was as swift as it was unpleasant. Slivers of chicken and vegetables flew into the air, closely followed by a cascade of snow-white basmati rice. As the friends-turned-combatants saw their meal landing unceremoniously on the pavement, they paused in their argument to take stock.

"What a mess. Come on … leg it!"

And so the two embarrassed young men rushed off into the mounting darkness, the evidence of their conflict quietly steaming upon the frosty ground.

Meanwhile, the middle-aged couple were in a hurry. They were rushing to meet friends for the 7.30pm performance of the ballet, *Peter Pan*. Already late, they knew time was of the essence. But haste would be their downfall in more ways than one.

The mush of curry and rice had been spread far and wide by the feet of office workers scurrying for trains and buses, not to mention the constant stream of high-heeled revellers waltzing into the city, intent on end-of-year festivities. And so the slimy mess sat there in all its stealth, ready and waiting for the moment to strike.

Tina (that would be the wife) was sending a swift message to their friends, while Gordon (her husband) silently weighed up the possibility of an interval ice-cream. Neither was aware of her right heel gliding into that puddle of fast food now chilled to perfection. For the briefest of moments she sensed herself in flight before – in an instant – she was flat out, her coat covered all the way up the back in a film of cold vindaloo. This was bad enough, of course, though in her descent she also found her right elbow taking the brunt of the fall, in one almighty knock.

Disorientated by the suddenness of it all, Gordon cast ice-creams from his mind as oh-so-cautiously he helped his wife to her feet. But those paving slabs proved every bit as treacherous as an ice rink, and infinitely less attractive. With much slipping and sliding she restored herself to an upright state, her elbow throbbing hard as her head started to ache in dull sympathy. In a split second, a serious-looking middle-aged woman appeared out of nowhere, a girl of perhaps student age by her side.

"I help." she said. "I *so* sorry … no speak English. Want to know you OK."

The couple chimed in harmony: "Thank you, yes! Thank you so much," deeply touched by such friendly concern from a stranger to their city who might so easily have kept her distance and walked on by. Tiny nods of shared appreciation were exchanged before they parted. Yet only a few seconds later she returned with a pack of wipes freely offered by her daughter. Pulling out first one ... then another ... then a third and fourth, she placed them respectfully upon a trembling hand. As Tina dealt with her now smarting grazes, Gordon did his best to remove the worst of the mess which had stuck like glue to his wife's coat.

A reassuring touch on the shoulder from the lady, and she was off into the shadows.

Immediately there arrived another traveller: a little old man, hatless and coatless.

"Aw, fur pity's sake now! Are ye alright dear? Whit a nasty fall. How'd it happen?"

"I slipped on some food somebody dropped, just there on the pavement," she replied, her eyes now welling up – in part on account of the fall, though mainly due to the telling of her story. "It's so kind of you to ask, but there's no need to worry. I'll be fine. Fine ... honestly."

The old man glanced at the fallen meal, imagining the off-hand way in which it had been dropped and left by people who, in his view, should have known a whole lot better.

"Idiots!" he cackled in contempt. "IDIOTS!!!" he yelled in an act of untameable solidarity with this woman who just a moment earlier had suffered so great a humiliation. And then, placing a calming hand on her arm, he looked her in the eye and offered the warmest of whispers: "Just so long as you're OK, pet."

The strangers shared a forlorn smile, before that wee old man receded into the night, his baggy Santa jumper glowing in the ugly glare of the street lights.

Meanwhile a guy carrying a bulging supermarket bag had spotted that all was not well. The pain of so sharp a fall was now etched upon Tina's face, and this was a sad sight for any concerned passer-by to see.

“Poor soul. Is there anything at all I can do?”

“Aw,” replied Gordon, stepping in, “that’s so very kind of you, but ...”

“HANG ON! I know the very thing,” interrupted the bag carrier raising a knowing finger to the night. “This’ll cheer y’up!” Tugging sharply on his two bag handles he revealed first an enormous snout, then a furry mane, and finally the full front half of a huge cuddly toy. “*The-e-ere* y’are!” he declared in triumph, as the couple burst into childlike giggles of delight at the incongruous sight of the smiling lion now gazing up at them.

“Ha-haaah!” laughed the husband. “That’s quite the big cat you’ve got there.”

“Aw, he’s so *lovely*,” echoed the wife, beaming brightly through her tears.

“Aye! I bought him in the toy shop jist today! You take care, luv. ... Just you take good care o’ yersel’, d’ye hear?”

And off he trotted, job done, his huge fluffy pal swinging on his arm.

Our observations complete, let’s leave Tina and Gordon to resume their journey as they marvel at the bizarrely wonderful place that is their unique and irreplaceable. As they walk, that pulsing elbow will be rubbed and flexed. There will be a conversation about how she had felt certain she was going to pass out, and how the nausea he had swept over him at that unforgettable moment of impact. But there will also be a deep reflection on three precious gifts which had come their way on a cold, dark Friday night close to Christmas, each one so freely given and so gratefully received in the space of one single minute: a minute of wild confusion and strange, strange salvation. And those people who came to their aid …

There had been that outsider who had leapt over a barrier of language to offer balm that would far transcend anything a pack of wipes could ever provide.

Then that man so fired up with outrage at the injustice of another’s plight. He had bellowed his word of support for one who had been wronged and brought so low.

Finally, what about that third passer-by who in a flash of purest inspiration had opened his bag to reveal a lion who would turn torment and tears into gulps and giggles?

Three total strangers then, unaware of each other’s existence. But just who *were* these travellers? These were the ones who had shared their human love so simply … so truly … as if sent from heaven itself.

And the glory of the Lord shone round about them.

Pause for pondering:

1. Think about a situation at any point in your life when you have found yourself facing a shocking or troubling emergency. If you were all alone, how did you cope? If others came to your assistance, what were your thoughts and feelings?
2. The parable of the Good Samaritan goes further in highlighting the willingness of an enemy and outcast (from Samaria) to do what supposed friends (a priest and a Levite) did not even attempt. What point is Jesus making in his own time?
3. How seriously do we take the transformative power of small, daily acts which prioritise the well-being of another person in need?
4. What is your view of the idea that God might intervene in our world by co-ordinating the actions of complete strangers?

Space for note-taking:



Swing to enter

a story of paradise

Fourth Sunday of Advent *1 Peter 3:8-12*

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For,

'Whoever would love life
and see good days
must keep their tongue from evil
and their lips from deceitful speech.
They must turn from evil and do good;
they must seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.' Amen. (NIV)

… they must seek peace and pursue it.

Vermilion (White Metal Abrasives) Ltd. was not one of the mid-1960s' most dynamic of businesses. True, its astonishingly dull range of products must have been of use to someone. (That much was clear from the sleek cut of the Managing Director's pinstriped suit, tailored for him on Savile Row, no less). But as to the nature and purpose of white metal abrasives themselves, who could say?

The company's warehouse was, in itself, quite impressive. Kitted out with towering rows of shelving, it had lanes in which fork lift trucks would whizz their way toward waiting lorries on to which big metal drums and bulging cardboard boxes would be transferred. These mundane cargoes might be bound for Wigan or Wokingham, Stavanger or Sydney. No place on planet Earth, it seemed, was so far from the Cheevleyside Industrial Estate as to be beyond the reach of Vermilion's honest commodities.

Annexed to the warehouse was the company's admin wing, spread over three levels, each one seemingly colder and more forbidding than the last. Beneath a suite of executive offices stood the ground floor's open-plan secretarial pool in which new-fangled electric typewriters elegantly tapped away without the clatter and din of their manual predecessors. Just beyond the rows of typists stood a metal staircase leading into the depths of the building with storage areas, a first aid post, a boiler room and janitorial cupboards. Only after passing through the closeted brushes and buckets would you come to an unprepossessing little door bearing a sign which read, enigmatically: "Waste Management Office: swing to enter". And behind that door sat Waste Management Officer Mr Dennis in the company of his assistant, Brian. Their sad little dungeon featured not so much as a window, yet it enjoyed the greatest asset to be found anywhere across the firm's considerable estate: a Bang & Olufsen record player, and at its side a vast array of long-playing microgroove discs filled with track after track of the finest jazz. For the hard-working duo, this was paradise.

"Mr Dennis," whispered Brian, so as not to disturb his boss, "may I ask …?"

"Work question or non-work question, my boy?" came the snappy rejoinder.

"Hmm," pondered Brian with lips pursed. "Non-work, come to think of it."

"Oh, I'm so glad you said that!" cried the WMO with a broad grin. "Ask away."

"Best LP of 1965 so far: Miles Davis with *ESP;* or John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*?

"Now then, *there's* a big question, Brian. I'll be sure to think on it over lunch."

And with that the office dinner break commenced, Mr Dennis rising for the staff canteen and a plate of shepherd's pie, while young Brian sat patiently until he knew he was alone. Then, listening hard to guard against the risk of returning footsteps, he reached into his desk drawer and withdrew two items: first a lunchbox, then a brand new stamp album, almost empty … though soon to be filled.

Part of the young man's work was to implement the company's on-site waste policy. This covered everything from engine oil to hand-towels. Fate had neatly decreed that he would handle "postal refuse", including significant numbers of envelopes. As a passionate philatelist since early childhood, Brian had landed lucky in his job. Being Vermilion's Assistant WMO, he had found himself in the privileged position of overseeing the disposal of in-coming envelopes from every department. Each afternoon they arrived (just before the hooter). And each subsequent lunch hour he would sort them, removing any interesting stamps. He took massive satisfaction in finding a new example sent from some distant, exotic land. (And while he often wondered why businesses in Central Africa or Scandinavia took any interest in White Metal Abrasives, he was profoundly glad that they did.)

His real passion was Christmas stamps. This was a largely seasonal pursuit, spanning no more than a mere five or six weeks of the winter, yet he knew that if he could pick out just one attractive specimen every day from mid-November to the end of the year, he could haul in an annual catch of 40 Christmas commemoratives … joy unbounded! Fresh additions would go straight into his album, any doublers being stowed away in a Royal Stewart tartan tin, with future plans in mind. Every single lunch hour passed in a flash, until at last he would hear a well-nourished Mr Dennis clomping down the metal steps by the boiler room. When he recognised the familiar tones of Dave Brubeck being hummed in five-four time, young Brian knew he had only a few seconds to bundle his pile of reclaimed stamps into the tin before secreting it safely in the drawer. Mr Dennis *must not* be allowed to know. Not yet.

"All quiet on the Western Front, Brian?" his affable boss asked, as he always did. "Good! Now down to our serious business. While it is hard to deny the beautiful intonation and ethereal spirituality of the great John Coltrane, I must also recognise the energetic groove of Miles Davis, backed by a stellar line-up of top jazz artistes. Ah … but then a voice in my head reminds me that Coltrane is in a unique class, all on his own. And so, after some

rumination, I conclude that I can only plump for *A Love Supreme* as my current front-runner for Office Jazz Album of the Year, 1965."

*****

The days of December passed quickly and in their passing they shortened considerably – though Mr Dennis and Brian could barely tell, seated as they were in their dark little jazz club of an office. But such niceties of the natural world were as nothing when contrasted with the high fidelity beauty of recordings made by Duke Ellington or Count Basie – theirs to marvel at each and every working day. As Christmas drew closer, seasonal stamps started snowing down into the basement for secret sorting, first in tiny drops, then as a generous flurry. Brian, who sang in his church choir, loved the story of Jesus and his birth in Bethlehem. And so a special place was always found at the very front of his album just for stamps of the Nativity. Not all arrivals were treated so reverently. When it came to an uninvited Santa Claus or a stray reindeer, these would be placed in a far less prominent position. And through it all, Brian knew exactly what to do. *Sh-sh-sh*, the voice in his head kept telling him. *Not a word to Mr Dennis. … Not a word.*

On the last day before the Christmas break, the Waste Management Office of Vermilion (White Metal Abrasives) Ltd. awarded itself a half day in recognition of quiet efficiency over the past year. Off to the pub they went, confident that in the frenetic world of White Metal Abrasives their absence would go totally unnoticed. After a couple of pints followed by a large ploughman's lunch (the undisputed *spécialité de la maison* of *The Plough and Sparrow*) it was time for the long-anticipated exchange of gifts. Mr Dennis went first, handing over a parcel, the shape of which was unmistakable. It could be nothing other than an LP, and there was little doubt as to the genre to which it would belong.

"This, Brian, is my late contender for Office Jazz Album of the Year 1965: an LP of seasonal classics from the fine piano of Vince Guaraldi. I hope you enjoy it, son."

"Thank you kindly sir," replied Brian, excited to be reaching into his bag for a large book-shaped parcel clad in brown paper with a bit of reused ribbon. "And I hope you enjoy my gift to you: a festive album of a quite different sort, with my greetings. And, if I may say, Mr Dennis, I trust it will get your … *stamp* … of approval!"

Pause for pondering:

1. Our story is subtitled, “a story of paradise”. In what ways do Mr Dennis and Brian convert a windowless storage room into their own little corner of heaven?
2. How do the pair “seek peace and pursue it” in their otherwise mundane working lives?
3. What powers does music have to transform lives?
4. 1 Peter 3:8 proposes that those in the church should be like-minded, sympathetic, loving to one another, compassionate and humble. Mr Dennis and Brian clearly manage that day in, day out. How about your congregation?

Space for note-taking:



The kneeler

a story of perspective

Christmas Eve (all-age) *Psalm 25:1-10*

In you, Lord my God,
I put my trust.

I trust in you;
do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
No one who hopes in you
will ever be put to shame,
but shame will come on those
who are treacherous without cause.

Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour,
and my hope is in you all day long.
Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,
for you, Lord, are good.

Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.
He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.
All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful
toward those who keep the demands of his covenant. Amen. (NIV)

He guides the humble in what is right …

Once upon a time, many centuries ago, the Grand Duke of Tuscany was terribly upset. And this on an otherwise lovely summer's day.

"Oh, I'm *terribly* upset," he squawked to himself. "I don't mind telling you that I'm on the very verge of a right royal hissy-fit."

The Grand Duke's big huff was all on account of far-distant Christmas. And though it was still far off, his problem was simple: he couldn't decide what present he should require from the men, the women, the children who were the loyal subjects of his small, though lovely, dukedom: "Every year it's the same. Should I tell them to buy me a gold-plated chamber pot? Should I ask them for a black stallion from Signor Ferrari's stables? Or simply a pair of monogrammed festive socks and a big box of Turkish delight?"

Just then, the Grand Duke had a brain wave: "When Christmas comes, there's never anything decent to watch on the telly. (Come to think of it, with this being mediaeval Tuscany, there isn't any telly at all.) The perfect gift would be something Christmassy for me to look at: a bright, colourful picture of some sort. That's it! This year my loyal subjects will finance a painting: one of Jesus … and Mary … and Joseph … and the wise men … and their precious gifts. Oh, clever, clever me!"

And so the Grand Duke told the Lord Chamberlain, and the Lord Chamberlain told the First Minister, and the First Minister told the Lord President, and the Lord President told the Earl Marshal, and the Earl Marshal told the Keeper of the Ducal Purse, and the Keeper of the Ducal Purse told somebody else whose position nobody ever seemed to know. And before anyone could say "Merry Christmas", the message had gone all the way down to a man named Peppino: an artist of great renown, whose flair with brush on canvas was a thing of rare wonder. But the days rolled by, and the Grand Duke saw no sign of this Peppino fellow.

"Time's getting short," he told his mace-bearer in no uncertain terms. "That artist boy had better be as snappy as a crocodile sandwich, I don't mind telling you."

And so it was that one cool, crisp day a donkey named Fred clip-clopped his way up the mound to the Grand Duke's Palace. By his side was a meek-looking gentleman in a bright red robe, a black velvet hat in one hand and an elegant cane in the other. At the portcullis they

reported to someone or other, who showed Peppino into the presence of the Keeper of the Ducal Purse, who marched him along to the Earl Marshal, who introduced him to the Lord President, who wandered with him through a long gallery of marble statues to the office of the First Minister. The pair strode along a corridor which led to the suite of the Lord Chamberlain, who wanted to have a quiet word with the man in red.

"Aaah, Peppino my dear fellow!" sighed the Lord Chamberlain in a way that was altogether too sweet to be wholesome. "I wanted to have a quiet word. It's like this: when the Grand Duke wants something, the people pretty much have to come up with the goods. And this year those goods would be a Christmas painting."

"*Si*," nodded Peppino, quite unsurprised by what the Lord Chamberlain had said.

"Now, here's what we're after, so listen up good and proper: Madonna and Child (obviously). Also Magi (three of them, ideally decked out in colourful robes and in a pose of – how shall we say? – adoration). And as you might expect, each one should be bearing his respective gift, if you get my drift, to the manger. And as to livestock, we'll go for ox and ass, plus the odd camel or two from the Orient. And I should add: all of the above done and dusted in time for the feast of St Lulu. And in return for the canvas, a dirty great pouch filled with lovely, colourful gems."

The deal sealed with a handshake, Peppino made his way back to Fred, then home to the studio. Peppino swiftly set about his task, starting, of course, with a donkey. He painted in the mornings. He painted in the afternoons. He painted in the evenings and occasionally through the night, such was his commitment to meeting the Lord Chamberlain's urgent deadline. And, sure enough, on the feast day of St Lulu, Peppino and Fred returned to the palace of the Grand Duke, a completed commission trundling along in the donkey cart behind. The veiled artwork, along with a velvet kneeler cushion, was brought into the presence of the great man who had, of course, been waiting for a sneak peek at his very own "Madonna and Child with Adoring Magi".

The painting was carefully set in position, its cover giving nothing away and the kneeler placed, just so, on the floor beneath. With a smile of keen anticipation upon his regal lips, the Grand Duke undertook the reveal, yanking off that veil with a deft flick of the wrist. But what he found displayed before him turned his smile into a right royal grimace.

"Here!" he cried in horror. Then, "Here!" again (for added emphasis, as he started marching up and down). "Oh, no, no, no," he grunted. "This will never do."

And all the while a patient Peppino stood before his patron, with a face of calmness and resolve. Despite the drama of the moment, he looked contentedly at his work as though he had not a single care in the world.

"It's all wrong, man!" bellowed the Grand Duke. "Just … just look at the thing. It's all out of skew from top to bottom. See the Wise Men's bulbous heads. And then there's the deformed curve of the haloes – they're squint, for goodness sake. Squint! And what about that weirdly shaped cow there? You'd never see a cow like that at the Royal Tuscan Show. Listen: do people in the know not rate you as a pretty decent canvas dabber?"

"*Si*," responded Peppino with an air of humble yet confident charm in his voice.

"Well, that's as may be, but the fact remains, matey, that you clearly can't paint Christmas. You're a disgrace. Away with you before I have you thrown in the moat!"

And with those words, the Grand Duke of Tuscany took aim and booted the cushion clean out of the window. "Now leave, before I do something I'd regret … like ever look at that monstrosity ever again. On your donkey, mate!"

With one final "*Si*" of dignity and restraint, Peppino bowed to the Grand Duke, picked up his strange, squint painting and left the palace. He wandered down the mound, dusted of the kneeler cushion and untethered Fred. But they didn't go home. Rather, artist and four-hoofed pal found their way to the little chapel of St Mary the Virgin. And there, in the priest's deserted sacristy, Peppino gently laid his unwanted masterpiece up against a wall. Then, picking up some parchment and a quill pen, he began to write:

Reverend Father,

Here is a Christmas gift for you and your flock. It might have been hung in a royal palace, but now I see it is meant for a different kind of house altogether: somewhere Our Lord himself might feel at home. Do with it as you please, but should you choose to display it in your beautiful place of worship, all I ask is this: encourage your people, young and old alike, to appreciate the kneeler, helping them do exactly as the wise men did before them all those years ago. For this piece to work will require the viewers to humble themselves upon bended knee. Only then will my painting spring to life before the eyes of the faithful.

I am your friend and humble servant,

Peppino

That very Christmas Eve at Midnight Mass, the children of the village, their families, and many more besides, queued patiently to take in this wondrous gift which had been left

specially for them. In turn, they would step forward, lowering themselves to the kneeler and bending their head upwards until it almost hurt. And *that* … was when it happened. For, you see, it takes a humble attitude of body and of mind for anyone to recognise the birth of the Christ child for what it is. Only on bended knee, did all become clear with a fresh, pure perspective.

And the Grand Duke? Maybe one day *he also* would make his way to the Chapel of St Mary the Virgin to be reunited with the cushion he had once unceremoniously punted out of his own palace window. And yes! Maybe – *just maybe* – he too would finally comprehend the truth-telling beauty of a painter named Peppino.

Pause for pondering:

1. The world has witnessed many rulers enchanted by self-importance. In this tale, what ends up being the Grand Duke's downfall?
2. Peppino's patience throughout "the reveal" speaks of quiet confidence. What were his motivation and purpose behind painting his "Madonna and Child with Adoring Magi"?
3. The role of the kneeler in this story may not be big, though it plays a vital part. What does the Grand Duke miss about it, which the worshippers fully understand?
4. The psalmist notes that God, "guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way". What challenges does this verse present to believers in a power-hungry 21st century?

Space for note-taking:



Dapper Dan

a story of impulse

Christmas Eve (watchnight) *Genesis 45:4-15*

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

'So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now hurry back to my father and say to him, "This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me – you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute."

'You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. Tell my father about all the honour accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly.'

Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterwards his brothers talked with him. Amen. (NIV)

... he kissed all his brothers and wept over them.

Although she was already late for work that dark Christmas Eve morning, Ingrid found herself rooted to the spot, gazing up at the new shop just off Albert Street in Kirkwall. For days she had been noticing the work progressing in the cramped little space: the kitting out of shelving and racks, the placing of odd stock. (And this shop's stock was most certainly odd).

In the twilight of that Orcadian dawn, what struck Ingrid as especially unusual was that every single piece of work had been accomplished with speed and efficiency by one solitary gentleman of late middle age – a man with the neatest grey beard she had ever seen. He had been dressed each day in a different combination of shirt and brightly-coloured tie (always with an impeccable half-Windsor knot). The word for him, she reckoned, would have to be "dapper". Yes. That was it: a real Dapper Dan if ever she'd seen one.

With her last day before the holidays about to begin, Ingrid was properly transfixed near the foot of a tall aluminium ladder, as she watched this gentleman, head torch in place, painting the shop's name on a sign above the door: "A" ... "N" ... "D" so far. "And". But as for the "and *what*", that was a mystery – and would remain so for the time being.

All through a rather uneventful morning of routine filings and tidyings, Ingrid's mind kept straying to her Dapper Dan and his shop of still uncertain identity. Who was he? And where had he come from? Certainly not Kirkwall, where Ingrid had lived and worked for some 20 years. She was good at names and even better at faces, but this fellow was a challenge.

At the stroke of one o'clock, Ingrid wolfed down a quick sandwich then set out on a lunchtime walk. To her right was the rich red and yellow stonework of St Magnus Cathedral in all its mediaeval solidity, and ahead of her the shopping streets of one of Europe's smallest and loveliest cities. As she walked she filled her lungs with the crisp winter air of Orkney, those islands so near to Scotland yet so far away. In due course Ingrid arrived in the little side street, where she paused and panted, taking in the now finished shopfront. Now it was bursting with things to buy: greetings cards mainly, though also what looked like framed quotations which adorned the interior walls. Ingrid suddenly remembered the sign over the window. There it was, complete in shimmering gold letters: "AND PETER".

The afternoon dragged on, as she got down to the thankless task of processing some long-ignored conveyancing. Then at 3.45, Evie the office manager popped in to say: "Your four o'clock called to postpone. Nothing more in the diary for today."

"Thanks Evie. I'm just going to meet a potential client. You head home, and Merry Christmas!"

A few minutes later, Ingrid walked through the door of "And Peter" to the gentle tinkling of an old-fashioned shopkeeper's bell. All around she saw black text on white paper and card. What little colour there was came from the hard, dark green of prickly holly twigs, in stark contrast to the full and free ruby red of their berries. The place was silent, save for a faint humming from under the counter. Ingrid delicately cleared her throat, and immediately the humming stopped as the top of a balding head appeared, swiftly followed by a pair of tortoiseshell half-moon spectacles and that oh-so-well-groomed beard.

"Ah!" exclaimed the shopkeeper as he rose further to reveal a black pin-striped suit, lime green shirt and lemon yellow tie. "Welcome, *madame … Joyeux Noël!* I would of course invite you in, only you are well and truly in already."

Ingrid was surprised by the quirky wit of his greeting, and found she rather liked it.

"Thank you! I saw you this morning on my way to work."

"The lady beside my ladder. You were watching – *most* intently – my sign-writing."

"Yes, and now that you're open for business, I'm keen to know what your business actually is."

"Dear lady, my (as you say) stock in trade is forgiveness. And there are not many shops dealing in this commodity. But first, an introduction. Daniel Lafarge: citizen of Switzerland and of the world (and, since last month, of Kirkwall). *Enchanté*."

"Ingrid Dunn: solicitor from just along the road. Did you say you *sell* forgiveness?"

"Sell? *Mais non*, for such treasure as forgiveness can only ever be given, and certainly never bought. But do I make a living from it? I do. These cards: each one crafted by me. And the quotations upon my wall? All have one thing in common: a thing which is always in need, though only rarely it comes to pass. Forgiveness, *madame*."

Daniel pointed out his signage above the racks of cards: to the left of the counter it read, “I forgive you”. To the right another sign, this time marked, “Forgive me”. Then in the corner a third which simply said, “Forgiven”.

“I create my own cards, with every day some new examples appearing, and no two messages quite the same. Some will be simple, with others more ornate, each one priced at £10. I see your concern, for it is indeed a lot to pay. Yet is this too much to ask if a card can open the sacred topic of forgiveness, perhaps offered … maybe received … or even shared?”

The pair looked eye to eye, holding that question in silence, until Ingrid nodded: “I see. Yes, now I can see the reality of what you do. Well done, *Monsieur*.”

With a gracious smile, Daniel beckoned Ingrid in the direction of a rack to examine his stock, each simple white card bearing a message of forgiveness inscribed in black ink by his distinctive cursive hand. Not one card had a single word inside, providing lots of room for the sender to say anything or everything that might need saying to the recipient.

“And you find that there is a market for your wares?”

“*Mais, absolument!* My works, they are in some demand. Wherever I take my shop – now Kirkwall ... now Avignon ... now Krakow – I stay perhaps nine months before ending my lease and moving on. Truly, I sell many, many cards, *non*? And these too. See?”

His gaze led her to the wall behind him with its display of framed quotations.

Ingrid read slowly and deliberately: “‘If you want to see the heroic, look to those who can forgive.’ (From *The Bhagavad Gita*).”

“Or this one, *madame*. *Regardez!*: ‘Those who are free of resentful thoughts surely find peace.’ (From the Buddha).”

“I like these quotations,” said Ingrid. “Different times … different faiths … one message. And here, from the Hebrew Bible: ‘… love covers all offences.’ (Proverbs 10:12).”

“I saw you looking up at my sign-writing. You wondered, I think, about the name of my shop. Those two simple worlds, ‘… and Peter’: they are taken from the New Testament: Mark’s gospel, chapter 16. I will leave you to find them for yourself. And when you do, I hope you will agree that these two little words are more than entitled to their fine gold lettering. Find those words, “… and Peter”, *madame*, and allow yourself to marvel at their meaning … their power … their implication for a failed disciple. And, by extension, their implication also for us, as failed disciples too.”

Daniel gently led Ingrid toward the “Forgive me” card rack: “It is Christmas Eve, *non*? A most wonderful time to pass on a gift to a loved on. Might … I interest you?”

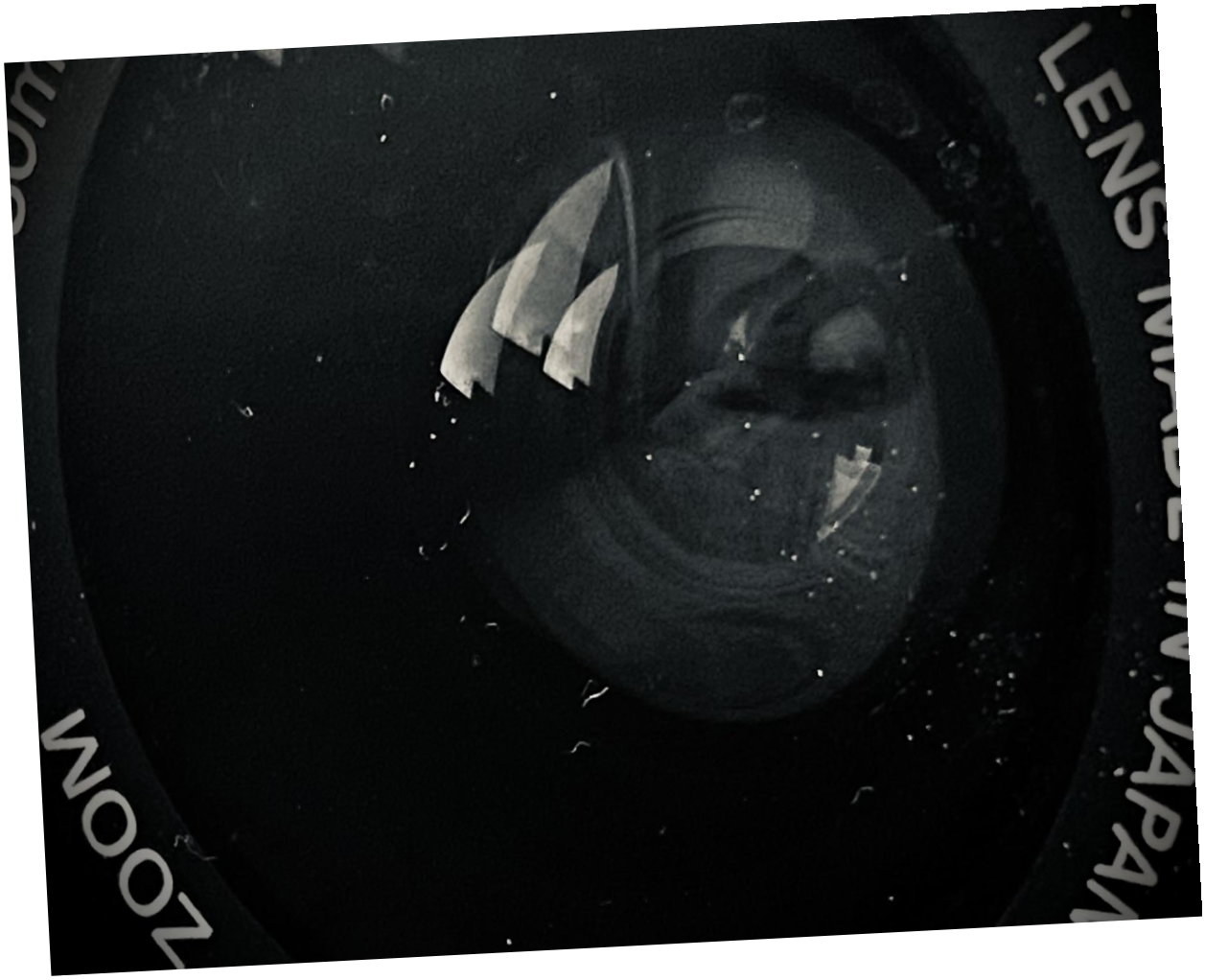
“Yes Daniel, you might. I’ll take one of those please, and can I order up two of that card there? Oh! And three of this one. (No, you’d better make it four.) “

“It is, of course, most economical to buy in bulk, *madame*. For that way you will receive a considerable benefit … in truth, a benefit far greater than you might ever have imagined possible.”

Pause for pondering:

1. In the book of Genesis the story of Joseph points us to the power to be found in true forgiveness. What difference was made to the lives of those who had been so cruel to their younger brother?
2. Daniel the shopkeeper has led an unusual life, going from place to place promoting his wares. Can you imagine what he has discovered along that curious road about forgiveness, about himself, about faith and life?
3. By the end of our story it is clear that Ingrid feels a great compulsion to reach out to others with a message of forgiveness. How easy does Daniel make this? And how difficult might it still be for her?
4. Christmas brings us close to the forgiveness of God. What are the consequences of Christ taking human form and coming among us?

Space for note-taking:



Spotted!

a story of concealment

Christmas Day *Mark 10:13-16*

People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. Amen. (NIV)

... the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

How would I describe myself? As a photographer and a loner who keeps a distance from his targets and never reveals his presence. Me and my long lens, we hide ourselves away and quietly do our job. And a pretty good job it's been.

The truth is I've had a fascinating life travelling the world, camera in hand. I enjoy creating images which point to the hidden, more meaningful sides of life, because it's impossible to tire of that most wondrous of all subjects: the human being. Every person on earth will be on a journey: a quest of sorts to become the best … the richest … the wisest. Or simply to get by from day to day. For me, shots of men, women, children – they're never portraits. They need to hold together something vital: the candid reality of human experience in the raw. Observations, unobserved.

It's a pleasure – a privilege, some would say – to chronicle what people are like in the here and now of their everyday living. And because this strange, compelling business of framing the perfect image is so important, I've always kept some healthy distance between my subjects and myself. And so I become the eavesdropper, looking in on humanity from the outside without any need of introduction or instruction. Far better to view a scene from a distance, unknown to the public whose actions I freeze in time (click!). My work, then, is about framing strangers who are just going about their business. Everything from roadside dice games to raging battles; from wedding processions to football riots: if it's there for the taking, I'll be ready, giving not the slightest hint of my presence. (On a shoot in Peru my minders nicknamed me *el francotirador*: the sniper.)

I've travelled the globe over the course of four decades now, though until 2005 I'd never visited the world's largest island: Greenland. My assignment was to arrive in the depths of winter and make a record of how communities are able, against all odds, to thrive and prosper in the bleakness of the north. Imagine a place where the sun creeps above the horizon around eleven o'clock, with sunset under way by early afternoon. Photographing the capital city of Nuuk would involve a good amount of raking shadows and intense, yellowing light on the eyes of locals, screwed up against the low-lying sun. And after dusk I would need to hope for a lucky break: perhaps a dark red flash of embers flaring up from a campfire into a pitch

black sky with fur-hooded neighbours chatting side by side. A challenge, then … though, I hoped, an exciting one.

My week-long solstice trip was to be based in a family home. My young hosts, Aali and his wife Ajuna, would point me in the direction of the best sites. And, as it turned out, they had an eye for an opportunity. There would be a trip to their local high school; another to nearby ice fields; a third to a community-run food festival with local delicacies on offer, plus craft stalls selling everything from beaded necklaces to carved animal-bone sculptures. All so photogenic that my shutter was on overtime as the shots mounted up day and night upon my overflowing memory cards.

I made a new friend in Nuuk: Ivaak, my hosts' four-year-old son. Though shy, he soon took an interest in my kit bag with its battered cameras and lenses, tripods and flash guns. I gave him a cheap disposable point-and-shoot as a gift. And in return, Ivaak brought me presents of his own: a pristine feather from a white-winged scoter; a bright pink scallop shell; an old truck from his toy box; a well-fingered square of chocolate to keep me going. He was kind.

Two days before Christmas, the little boy sidled up to me, his mom by his side, and whispered something which was obviously very important.

"Ivaak," said Ajuna, "is inviting you to his nursery Christmas celebration. It will mark the start of the holidays, with songs, and dancing too. It all starts at dusk ... or, as you call it, early afternoon!"

"Sure thing Ivaak! I'll be there," I replied, nodding to the lad with a supportive smile. "I fly out late tomorrow, but we'll make it work, yeah?"

Baggage sorted and thick winter coat zipped up to my chin, I took my position a safe distance away from the little red church where the gathering was set to take place. With the sun's rays dying overhead, the kids of the nursery started snaking their way through snow which glistened quietly in the beams of their little torches.

Grouping around a giant Christmas tree (specially imported all the way from Denmark) the little kids stared up at its peak as they took in the wonder of the star of Bethlehem, a holy village far back in time, yet so real through the power of childhood wonder. As those little ones swayed their way around the tree's broad circumference, I took shot after shot, recording a little-known tradition which could – and soon would – end up speaking not just to the people of Nuuk but to those of the wider world, as magazine readers were let into a realm of mystery.

As the procession made its way through the gathering darkness, parents and nursery staff led the wobbly line of toddlers from tree to church, where Ajuna was waiting just inside the door to welcome each one into the warmth. From my concealed vantage point I spotted an opportunity. If I zoomed in on a single child's face, lit by the glow of the church's candles, I could frame a powerful shot. Time was of the essence, so I braced myself for the perfect moment and pressed my shutter release. Glancing at my camera's screen, I was shocked to see the beaming face of Ivaak, his eyes focused straight down the barrel of my telephoto lens with a look of pure mischief. For the first time in my career I had been spotted by a subject, though how he had picked me out in the darkness I'll never know. At first I felt let down by my failure … outsmarted by an observant kid who had found me out. But this was Ivaak, my new friend who had just given me my best photograph of the week.

Then it struck me like the white-hot burn of a dying flash bulb: there had always ... *always* ... been a harsh motivation lodged deep within my solitary craft, keeping me at a distance as I lurked in the shadows, hunting my prey through stealth alone. To me, those unwitting subjects had been little more than victims of my concealment. Sure, I was professional enough, yet a little child was all it took to lead me to the truth of the man I'd become: a power-hungry hunter, detached and uncaring … except for my pay-cheque.

Too soon I'd boarded the flight home, quickly falling into a deep sleep (the kind that only ever comes when a job is done, the assignment at last complete). Some hours later I woke to the in-flight command to "fasten all seat belts". I yawned heavily, finding myself on the wrong side of a shattered dream. As if squinting at some vague, mental snapshot, grey and grainy upon my fogged-up consciousness, I only just managed to pick out the familiar face of a small Greenlandic boy winking up at me. Though where was he lying? In a manger of tethered whale bones, no blankets or straw in sight – only animal skins to keep him warm.

A Christmas illusion? Or a sharp and timely prod to my tired, old, urban cool? I think I got the message. God knows, it takes a tiny child to make us see who we are, turning around the smug and arrogant in a wholly unbidden joy.

Pause for pondering:

1. The photographer delights in being the hidden figure looking into a scene, unseen. What does this point to in their mode of working? And possibly even in their character?
2. What effect did the shot of Ivaak's smile have on the detached professional, initially and a few moments later?
3. Does God use our dreams to communicate important messages? Have you ever experienced this?
4. Jesus says: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." What might Jesus mean by the words, "such as these"?

Space for note-taking:



The Alderson bequest

a story of priorities

Sunday after Christmas *Luke 1:68-75*

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." Amen. (NIV).

... he has come to his people and redeemed them.

There can be few things more impressive than someone who is prepared to put their money where their faith is. And in the case of the fondly remembered Dr and Mrs Alderson – John and Bette – all of the congregation were able to recall the most devoted of couples whose personal commitment shone through both their words and their actions. Proud proponents of Christian giving, and active church elders to the end, they had led from the front until well into their ninth decade. And when they died only a few months apart, there was real sorrow, though a sorrow that was tinged with the kind of joy which truly sets that word apart from mere happiness. These, after all had been lives well lived, with a passing which pointed to the promise of God's nearer presence.

In due course news of a donation filtered out from kirk session to congregation. The bequest which had been set up many years earlier promised some pretty big benefits to St James's Parish Church. Thanks to the kindness of the couple, the congregation would soon find itself unusually well-resourced. Johnnie, as everyone had called him, was a man whose remarkable success in business had been eclipsed only by his generosity as a philanthropist for good causes that meant a lot to him. As a result, the congregation now had access to "The Alderson Mission Fund" (and an eye-wateringly sizeable mission fund it turned out to be).

Thanks to some wise investment which helpfully gave and kept on giving year in, year out, exciting new church initiatives were dreamt up and set in place. These provided for everything from a purpose-built annex aimed at the very young, to a minibus which got the very old to and from church. In the wider community new mission initiatives sprang up year by year, resulting in a vibrant relationship between the congregation and its neighbours. Other congregations might have dreamt of such a treasure trove. For St James's though, it was their lived reality.

Knowing that Mr and Mrs Alderson had been particularly fond of Christmas in all its spiritual glory, one early innovation had been a competition each autumn in which young people from the local high school would be challenged to come up with a seasonal presentation: a song; a sketch; a short story. This year the challenge was a poetic one on the theme: "What Christmas means to me". A judging panel was pulled together, involving the Head Teacher plus staff from the Religious Education and English departments. As was always the case, the panel

soon found that the prospect of a £500 prize served as an effective motivator, causing the students to put on their thinking caps and get down to some serious writing, each one imagining, come the end of the year, what it would feel like to be clutching that fabled victor's cheque.

On the first Sunday of Christmas, as was the custom, the congregation was kindly joined by Mrs Redmayne, the school's head teacher. By her side was the slight figure of George, a 13-year-old from first year. The youngest winner of the Alderson Award to date, he was presented with his prizes: a little olive-wood Nativity scene from Bethlehem with an engraved plaque on its base, plus the long-awaited £500 prize cheque, tucked safely inside a large Christmas card. Then, the presentation complete, George was invited to step forward to deliver his poem on "What Christmas means to me".

As the church members clapped him loudly to the microphone, the tiny smiling figure clung tightly to his hand-written poem. Straightening his glasses, he started to read:

Cold, dark nights made bright with lights.

Trips to stores and knocks on doors.

Children singing, loud bells ringing.

That's what Christmas means to me.

Girls and boys unwrap their toys.

Parents view a joy so true.

Grandma merry with her sherry.

That's what Christmas means to me.

Neighbours glad and no-one sad.

Being there with time to share.

Warmth that shows in houses frozen.

That's what Christmas means to me.

Sharing food is always good.

Knowing care is everywhere.

Building hope so all can cope.

That's what Christmas means to me.

Give a gift … your spirits lift!

Kindness shared in lives repaired.

Days of cheer, the best all year.

That's … what Christmas means to me.

After the service, the Rev Annie Dodds spotted the smiling figure of the Aldersons' eldest daughter, Alison Ritchie. She was standing in the hall enjoying some mulled wine and a mince pie. Alison had followed in her father's footsteps, becoming a much-respected preaching elder who shared her parents' passion for the Christian faith.

"Didn't George do well? You must be delighted, Alison."

"Oh yes!" nodded the elder. "Young George is obviously a very gifted writer, able to pass on a powerful message in front of a large congregation."

Annie agreed, adding: "I loved the hopefulness of his poem."

"Me too!" said Alison. "And I was strangely moved by the sense of social conscience which shone through his verses. Deeply inspiring stuff. In fact, I reckon there were only three things missing from that Christmas poem."

"Oh yes?" probed the minister, in curiosity. "And what three things were they?"

Alison paused a moment, glancing around the hall with a conspiratorial eye, scanning this way and that, just to make sure no-one would hear what she had to say. She raised the gentlest of smiles before moving close to her minister's ear and whispering: "Only these three things were missing: … the Father ... the Son ... and the Holy Spirit."

Pause for pondering:

1. The prophecy of Luke chapter 1 focuses on God's redeeming grace and the faithful service of God's people flowing from Christ's birth. In what ways did the lives of Johnnie and Bette Alderson embody that calling?
2. Young George shows no interest in reindeer and elves. What *is* he interested in, and how close to the message of Christmas does he get?
3. Johnnie and Bette's daughter, Alison, very much admires the poem, but feels that something is not quite right. What misgivings does she have over George's message?
4. "What Christmas means to me": what kind of poem would you write?

Space for note-taking:



Fernanda's gifts

a story of sensitivity

Epiphany *Matthew 16:21-28*

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'

Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

'Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.' (NIV)

… and that he must be killed …

This is the fourth and final instalment in the story of a teenager named Maria dos Santos. The girl's former head mistress, Miss Fernanda da Silva, has come to "The Blue Parrot", a rundown bar in São Paolo, Brazil, to bring gifts to a new baby boy.

Pressing her way through a maze of tables and chairs, Miss da Silva raised her arms in anticipation of the big hug which was sure come her way. She smiled broadly as her eyes met those of the young woman she had been longing to spend time with: Maria dos Santos, her star former pupil and now a teenage mother.

"*Mãe de Deus*," she found herself whispering under her breath, before gathering herself for the important task to come.

"Dona Fernanda!" beamed the girl, unable to contain her embrace.

"Dona Maria," nodded Fernanda with, perhaps, a certain reverence.

Coffee was ordered along with cake, for this was a special day, the two women reunited and able to pick up their friendship after a period of enforced separation.

"Thank you for all you've done for me … for us," said Maria, knowing that her head mistress had given her, among other things, faith sufficient to move mountains.

"But what did I do?" asked Fernanda, genuinely puzzled by the girl's compliment.

"What did you do? Why, you affirmed my calling from God. You took a stand for the cause of heaven when lesser teachers would have dismissed me as mad or (at the very least) delusional. You stood by me. You were there."

As the waiter returned bearing a tray, the teacher leant down to open her handbag, from which she withdrew, one by one, three little pouches made of finest black velvet, the openings sealed by drawstrings of braided golden silk. Laying them on the table between them, she sipped the freshly made coffee, delighting in its excellence.

"You chose this bar well," she noted, looking around the dingy interior of the smoke-stained *boteca*.

“My uncle’s place,” winked Maria. “Fine refreshments at family rates. But what have we here … these little bags?”

“For you,” nodded Fernanda, sliding them in Maria’s direction. “I want to give you something special for the baby … but no. These gifts contain objects which are, I will say, significant to the child’s future (and, I fear, to yours too).”

“The word ‘fear’: how it intrigues me,” said Maria. “Most people have given us baby clothes. Though if I am to be honest, I fully expected gifts from my favourite teacher that would be out of the ordinary. And here, it seems, I have them in three little pouches. I take it I will be pondering their contents for years to come?”

“Oh, yes, I would imagine you will. And if I may be so bold, I hope so.”

Maria had always enjoyed a good puzzle, and so she eyed up each of the bags carefully. Turning to her sleeping child, she posed a question: “Now then baby boy, which of the three will we open first? Will it be this one? Or this? … But no. The heaviest of the three, I think.”

Struggling to lift the bag, she could only speculate on its contents.

“Lumps of lead?” she asked with a smile.

“Or lumps of something just a little more precious. Go on … open it.”

Tipping the bag, Maria found, to her wonder, dazzling cubes of solid gold.

“How is your mathematics these days?” inquired the teacher. “Five dice and six sides to each ... so how many possible combinations?”

Maria thought for a moment before giving her answer: “Looked at from every possible angle, that would be six to the power five.”

“Well done! Good girl. No fewer than 7,776 different outcomes from only five little cubes. Many would be surprised by this figure, although it is as nothing when set against the infinite possibilities of a child’s life lived in the company of his heavenly Father – this baby boy’s life, Maria.”

“What can I say but thank you! Imagine: real gold, surely fit for a king.”

“Correct – for a king who must navigate his way across an ocean of change and chance, choices and temptations, just to stay true to God’s plan for him. And one day this little pouch of gold might serve as a reminder to him not merely of his mother’s heavenly call, but of his own.”

“I’m … I’m sorry,” stumbled Maria, not quite grasping the significance of the glistening dice she was turning in her hand.”

“Gold, Maria. As you said, it points to kingship. And if your angel visitor taught you anything it was surely that your child would be born to take on the mantle of divine royalty. As such, he must be determined to rule fairly, with justice. And so … let these shimmering dice fascinate your little boy as he considers the many probabilities and possibilities which will come his way. Now, pick another bag.”

Maria weighed up the pouches, deciding upon the one that was flat and rectangular.

“A prayerbook!” she cried as she pulled the object into the light. “And an old one, I think, going by how much it has been read.”

“From my mother, a person of deep faith. This has been at my bedside since her death, when I must have been about your age. It has kept me close to God through good times and through bad. Its words are true, and its poetic style is a thing of beauty. I know it has the power to keep its reader on the path of devotion.”

“But no …” started Maria. “I couldn’t possibly.”

“Oh yes,” insisted her teacher, “you must, and you will. Only by staying committed to God, the source of all love, will your son see for himself the meaning of love. And in that knowledge he will live out his own love for one and all. You are his mother, and you must be his example … his guide … in the ways of faith.”

“So,” said the young girl, cupping the third pouch in her hand. “Our final bag, and this one makes me feel ill at ease, as though I am already aware of its contents.”

“A word of caution,” warned Fernanda. “Here is a gift, sombre like no other, yet one which I am afraid will be every bit as essential as the ones already before you.”

The teenager slid her hand into the pouch and pulled out a thing of strange smoothness and dreadful beauty: a crystal skull, clear as ice yet far more chilling.

“This takes us back to your heavenly visitation, for the news which the angel brought cannot have consequences a mother would ever wish upon her firstborn. The third gift points to death – violent death at the hands of those who would stop at nothing to oppose God’s way. Maria, this gift helps define both your son’s path and, by extension, your own. And may God Almighty grant you strength for the road.”

At this the baby stretched and yawned, then opened his eyes just a little.

“Hush, hush,” sang Maria, rocking her son so gently. “No need to worry. Not now. Not yet – though that day will come. This much I will say: I am the Lord’s servant. And may the angel’s word to me be fulfilled. Fulfilled, my darling child, in you.”

Pause for pondering:

1. Fernanda teases out meaning from the physical objects she brings as gifts for Maria. What other resonances might these have for the young mother?
2. The coming of the Magi in Matthew chapter 2 features gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Can you imagine, perhaps years after Jesus’ birth, a conversation between mother and son around these prophetic presents? What might Mary have told him?
3. Looking at the Christmas stories in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, in what ways do the experiences of Mary, the mother of Jesus, either differ from or relate to those of other first-time mums?
4. In Matthew chapter 16, Peter challenges Jesus, saying of Good Friday’s approach: “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” If Mary had been present, how might she have reacted to Peter’s bold assertion?

Space for note-taking:

A Christmas request

These resources are made available 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. The agency 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):

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

Thank you!

