

8th December 2020

Essence

**“Who, both by precept and example, shows
That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose,
Convincing all by demonstration plain,
Poetic souls delight in prose insane;
And Christmas stories tortured into rhyme,
Contain the essence of the true sublime.”**

Lord Byron, English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (of Wordsworth)

I know nothing of the relationship between Byron and Wordsworth, and I'm certainly not going to enter into the debate on the relative merits of prose and poetry. But I was struck by Byron's anxiety about "Christmas stories tortured into rhyme" and his unspoken question about whether this means they lose or retain their essence of truth.

Some years ago, I attended a school Christmas event when my younger grandson was in an Infant Class. There had been much preparation, of course, and the "show" was to be offered three times: once for the whole school, and twice more for parents, grandparents and the like. I'd long since accepted that the traditional presentation of the Christmas Nativity had to be "jazzed up" for a modern era, and that "traditional" carols would be replaced with more accessible songs for the children. But what I *wasn't* expecting was "The Sad Story of the Reluctant Elf"! Here was Santa and Toyland, good Elves and bad Elves, Reindeer and Expectant Children. Mary, Joseph, shepherds, kings? Barely a mention. Baby Jesus? A passing reference. Bethlehem, stables, mangers? Nowhere to be seen. I *suppose* the essence was there – somewhere! But it was extremely hard to find, in a "Christmas" story which had simply been used as a convenient peg on which to hang a bit of fun.

I have no problem with fun or making important things accessible to children. But I *do* have a problem – to paraphrase Byron – with the Christmas story being tortured into modernity. So please allow the story to be told. Make it new, and interesting, and accessible. But don't torture it out of Christmas. Let the essence of it make a difference.

A prayer for today

*Lord, if the essence is love,
let there be enough of it in me to make a difference. Amen*

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