**Dursley Tab Carol Service 22nd Dec 2019**

**What Christmas means to me/My most meaningful Christmas**

**Christmas 1993 – Clare N-H**

In my early twenties I was a junior reporter on a weekly newspaper. I had long wanted to be a journalist and this was my first real position and the lousy pay and damp bedsit didn’t dent my excitement at finally being on track for the career I wanted. I threw myself into the role and had a community around me that worked hard and played hard too. All was good, until Christmas when everyone ‘went home’. Only I didn’t have a home to go to or any family I was able to visit and so I would offer to work on Christmas Day to avoid any thoughts or questions about where I was spending Christmas and to avoid spending the day alone with my record player.

One year I went with the Salvation Army as their band played in hospitals and homes around the area and the next year they invited me to join them at their community Christmas dinner so I could roll up my sleeves and serve and interview both volunteers and guests. I didn’t believe in God and was highly suspicious of organised religion but liked them and what they were doing – which is how I got to be in a community centre on Christmas Day, dishing up food, armed with my pen and notebook, talking with a whole range of people to gather enough material for a feature article.

And that is where I met Peggy. Peggy was in her late eighties, was living alone on a low income and had got to the point in life where she just said what she felt, she didn’t see the point of niceties or discretion, but also had a twinkle in her eye that spoke of warmth as well as fearlessness. And to my horror, almost as soon as I sat down and started interviewing her as she ate her lunch, she was interviewing me and very quickly and assuredly spoke about how good it must be for me to be there because otherwise I might not have spoken to anyone all day. My cover, as a young, focused journalist, so committed to my job that I was working on Christmas Day, was blown in a matter of seconds. She looked at me like she really knew me and without agenda and coming from a place of what felt like absolute acceptance of herself, she turned the tables and helped me, served me. Suddenly, it wasn’t who was there because they were working or who was there because they couldn’t cook up a big Christmas dinner for themselves, it was almost like my own personal version of the WW1 Christmas Day football games, it was two fellow human beings recognising common humanity and finding joy in connection and community.

Christmas is our almighty God, creator of heaven and earth coming to live amongst us, for *all* of us. So that everyone can know that they are loved and have an identity beyond age, career, financial or relationship status. Peggy spoke to me on a profound level that day, that utterly sidestepped any status or identity I might have been trying to desperately carve for myself. As a Christian now I look back and recognise how the topsy turvy nature of our relationship also echoed Jesus’ arrival in Bethlehem and his ministry. Born as a vulnerable child into a poor family under Roman occupation, Jesus was an unlikely king. His ministry of healing and forgiveness was expressed through service, not through status, political or military power, as he spoke into people’s lives, recognising everyone as made in God’s image and giving us assurances of our identity. I felt so blessed that day as Peggy spoke to me, honestly, gently, directly with a glint in her eye and probably a fair bit of sherry in her veins – an elderly and frail lady, socially and financially vulnerable, but rich in terms of a peace and understanding that had eluded me.

A couple of weeks later I went to visit her at her home but a neighbour said she was in hospital. I cycled round to the hospital and found her and we laughed together again, this time at her bedside as she encouraged me to be the person I was meant to be and not settle for second best. She said she was due out of hospital in the next few days and I promised to visit her at her home the following week. When I called round the neighbour came out again and said she was sorry to say that Peggy had died in hospital.

I have to say, I felt deeply upset for the passing of this elderly lady I had only met twice, yet so grateful for her wisdom and company and her legacy has lived on with me. What she taught me was the value of shaking off our easy and convenient ways of interacting, of seeing one another, and instead, viewing others and ourselves as someone precious. Perhaps, that’s just easier at Christmas when we are reminded that God came to this earth for all of us, to bring hope, reconciliation and fullness of life. Peggy showed me the worth of being vulnerable, brave, impoverished, rich, humble, gentle, joyous and strong, she was hope in a surprising place for me just like I pray that a baby in an animal’s shelter 2,000 years ago can be again for us all this Christmas and beyond.

**Christmas reflection: Steph A**

I think Christmas changes in meaning and emphasis at each stage in our lives. For the past three years I have delighted in seeing it through the eyes of my young children, as they discover it for the first time.

The shouts of "Wow! Wow!" from the backseat of the car as they spot houses with Christmas lights out the window, and the urgency with which they run to the tree, sticky fingers extended, excited to show me the decorations for the fifth time that day.

There are also the more humorous experiences, like our attempt to make Christmas tree handprint cards for our friends and family that left the kids looking like the Incredible Hulk, and the 20 minute tantrum in a garden centre because Mummy was not prepared to pay £400 for a six-foot reindeer!

But it was actually this summer, when holding my daughter close while feeding her one hot afternoon that I came across a Christmas poem that gave me pause. A poem about another mother, Mary, and her child.

The Jesus in the Christmas story has always seemed like this perfect baby, "no crying he makes", the sort that would be really annoying in a baby group! But when I read this poem his raw humanity became clear, the Word became flesh.

As I held my baby close I thought of Mary doing the same, drinking in that new baby smell. Of her dealing with the same sleepless nights and nappy explosions, but also enjoying his first smile, first words, first steps.

Jesus was God's son, but he was also Mary's boy and I thank God for her love, her faith and her courage in following his call.

**Cradle by Eugene H. Peterson**

{She gave birth to her first-born son

And wrapped him in swaddling clothes,

And laid him in a manger.

Luke 2:7}

For us who have only known approximate fathers

And mothers manqué, this child is a surprise:

A sudden coming true of all we hoped

Might happen. Hoarded hopes fed by prophecies,

Old sermons and song fragments now cry

Coo and gurgle in the cradle, a babbling

Proto-language which as soon as it gets

A tongue (and we, of course, grow open ears)

Will say the big nouns: joy, glory, peace;

And live the best verbs: love, forgive, save.

Along with the swaddling clothes the words are washed

Of every soiling sentiment, scrubbed clean

Of all failed promises, then hung in the world’s

Backyard dazzling white, billowing gospel.

From *Holy Luck: Poems of the Kingdom,* Canterbury Press Norwich, 2014.

**A Nigerian Christmas – Debbie H**

Twenty–six Christmases ago a group of my friends and I decided to go to Nigeria for Christmas to stay with mutual friends who were working with the Leprosy Mission. From the outset we knew it would be an adventure but the drama began before we even left the UK when only two of us were given permission to enter Nigeria, with my visa arriving in the post literally the day before the flight. Even arriving in the airport was an experience when the luggage handler on the carousel got trapped and screamed with pain as his leg broke. To physically get out of the airport we were required to bribe officials.

But in other ways there were many similarities, we arrived a few weeks before Christmas and although the weather and markets were completely different from the UK the pre-Christmas excitement and bustle was very familiar.

My friends lived on a remote compound supporting individuals and families who, due to their leprosy, had been shunned and excluded by their tribes and the wider society. They were the poorest of the poor. The compound included a hospital, clinic and several villages formed entirely of misplaced people. Everyone there was very grateful for the medical support they received and, although they had no money for their care, they would often show their appreciation through giving gifts. One gift that arrived when I was here was a chicken who soon became called ‘Mr Christmas’ and was fed and fattened enthusiastically up to his namesake day. I really didn’t enjoy just such a close relationship to Christmas dinner.

There were many, many things that made that Christmas day so different - I can remember it clearly - even though so many other Christmas’ tend to merge into one!

There was picking citrus fruit from the trees for breakfast and the novelty of wearing a T shirt.

But what was most striking was the way we spent our time. Once you take out unwrapping presents, worrying about how long to cook the turkey, playing games and catching up with special Christmas TV events it’s amazing how much time you have left.

In the compound the whole focus of the day was to be in church. The Christmas message of Emmanuel, ‘God with us’ was a very precious idea for people who felt rejected by the whole of the world.

As good Brits I remember arriving in time for the beginning of the service. The church had no walls just pillars, a roof and wooden benches. We were there for the next 3 to 4 hours. During which time families processed in at different times, all dressed in the most beautiful clothes. All year they would save up and then spend the little money they had on a length of fabric that everyone in their family group would have clothes made from. The colours and patterns were stunning and the impact each fabric made was so much greater because whole rows of people would wear it. The excitement the families felt to be there together was palpable. Some of the songs we sang were recognisable Christmas carols – sung to an African drum.

After church we returned to my friends’ house. In that culture Christmas day was also all about going to greet your neighbours and for the rest of the day a steady stream of people from all the villages filed into their home. We shared coke and sweets with them and they shared singing, drumming and dancing with us. In intervals, we took it in turns to slip into the kitchen to grab a moment of calm and I remember catching the Queen’s speech on the BBC world service – the only bit of ‘normal’ Christmas that day.

It wasn’t until it was late and dark that we finally tucked into Mr Christmas.

It was a day with no expectations of receiving anything material. There was dancing instead of presents and for that reason it was an incredibly rich Christmas.