



Coming home for Christmas



Every year I come back to Christmas like a traveller returning home after a year away in a foreign land.

I know this place.

And I am pleased to be here. The pictures on the walls are familiar – like the people and the events in the Christmas story. I am enriched, comforted by the old things. But I see new things, and see the old things in new ways. I have changed, I am changing. We all are. Ideas surface, gleam and take flight.

Christmas, the Christmas that is not about the bubbly frenzy of all the preparations for the

big day, still retains its shimmering mystery: ordinary people caught up in the divine drama that is the hinge of history. They are invited to take part, as we are; seeking, as we can; choosing, as we do; pressured, as we are; afraid, exhilarated, and, in the end, grateful, awed, content.

Here the poems, the illustrations, the reflections, and indeed the quotations from the Biblical accounts which inspire them all, combine, we hope, to bring to life some of the myriad facets of the birth of the one who came to change our world, and us, and still does today.

First John**First John**

John was the first to know,
Tucked up in the womb,
No bigger than an avocado,
When Mary entered the room.

He, having no breath to call 'Attention',
To the High King of all creation,
Small as a mustard seed in the virgin's belly,
Leapt like a gazelle against the soft insides,
A wordless hallelujah of delighted surprise.
And heard his mother's booming reply,
And Mary's words soaring like starlings to
the sky.

That was where he learned
That the darkness
Cannot keep out the light;
That faith comes by spirit
And not by sight;

That a son can be ahead
Of his mother;
That one testimony
Can lead to another.

Later people would ask him when it began.
The truth is: he was always Jesus' man.



When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ...

LUKE 1:41

John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, became a hugely influential figure in Israel and beyond. Thousands went into the desert to hear him and we know that years after his death he had followers in places as far away as Ephesus, some 1200 miles from Jerusalem. But celebrity and popularity didn't turn his head. He never saw himself as anything more than a warm-up act, a forthright herald preparing the people

for the Messiah's imminent arrival. Few warm-up acts have ever been so self-effacing, so content to leave the stage, and so clear about the superiority of the one who would follow: 'I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals,' he said. He was imprisoned for denouncing Herod's adultery, and subsequently executed.

Kings



Kings

We were not three.
And not kings.
At least not when we arrived.
And really more curious than wise,
Craning for truth in starlit skies.
But at least looking,
At least checking
What we thought we knew:
A king born for the Jews.

No, we were not wise.
More stupid than wise,
Asking another king
To point us to a rival's cradle.
But at least asking,
And finding truth in the old scroll,
Truth a murderer would not recognise,
But wary to ply us with winsome lies
And play a deferential role.

No, we were not so wise.
More blind than wise,
Searching for a king
For someone else.
But at least searching,
And finding, in someone else's king,
Our end, the end of lifeless ways,
The rule for all our days.

Later they fancied us kings.
In that, there was only this truth:
He who would wear a crown
Must first bow low,
Must first bow down.



... and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

MATTHEW 2:9-10

Every day millions of people look to the stars for guidance, hope and purpose, scanning their horoscope in a daily paper or having it beamed to their phone. The Bible bans astrology but that doesn't mean that God does not speak through his creation or that he will not turn even a misplaced enthusiasm into a stepping stone to the truth ... the seeker finds, the seeker will be found.

Herod's Song

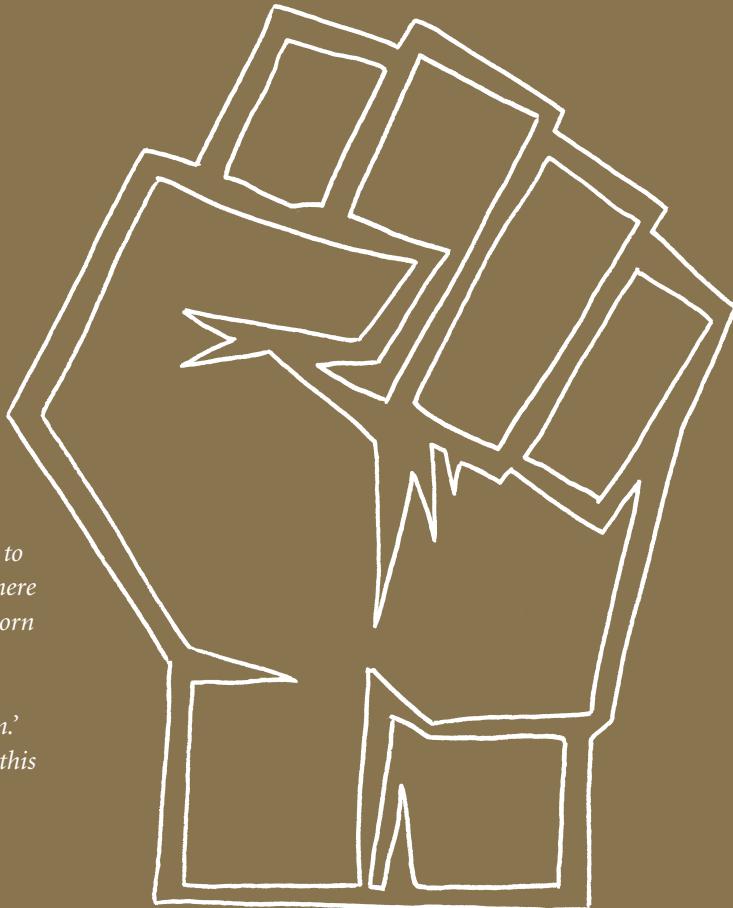


Herod's Song

Twinkle, twinkle little star,
Now I wonder where you are.
Son of David born to be,
King, they say, instead of me.
We shall see, we shall see.

Magi from the East came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’

MATTHEW 2:1–2



We should never underestimate how far those in power will go to protect their position, their autonomy, their independence – Saddam Hussein’s murder of his sons-in-law in Iraq, Nixon’s

attempt to cover-up the Watergate break-in in the US, Assad’s brutality in Syria, Mugabe’s repression in Zimbabwe, Putin’s serial manipulation of the electoral system in Russia ...

Herod found himself confronted by the claims of a rival king. So do we.

Little lamb

'Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'

JOHN THE BAPTIST AT BETHANY

JOHN 1:29

Little Lamb

Mary
had a
little
lamb

His heart was pure as snow
And
though
he
loved
us
very
much
We
told
him
where
to go.