

One of the best and the simplest of the Christmas joys which grace our celebrations must surely be the grand old tradition of re-connecting with that which is "long lost": old songs, old friendships, old places are all revisited and renewed, if only in remembrance. Part of our devotion to this festival seems to be that we try to set our houses in order, and put things in their proper places, and make things the way they ought to be. For many of us, the clearest idea we have of "the way things ought to be" is the way things *used* to be. Fondly remembered images of perfect Christmases past seem somehow to shimmer and float just out of sight, like the steam of my breath on the chill night air. The slightest encounter with any relic of those real old days, can send us back that way, to "oughta be" and "always been." I don't know if you're like this at Christmas time, but I know that I sure am.

For me this year it was a visit, from a long lost cousin, who remarked in passing that it happened to be our Grandfather's birthday and that he would have been 103. And I thanked her for mentioning it, and said that I had been thinking of him and Grandmother of late, partly because both of their birthdays fell in December and partly because it is Christmas and there is a part

of me that always celebrates Christmas at their house, even though they're gone.

It is funny how these little exchanges seem sometimes to open a little doorway, a tiny slip into other times, and suddenly I can see and smell and hear it all. I hear the gravel on the circular drive lined with trees and gardens, smell the apples and peat moss in the car shed, see the cheery windows' welcome. There's the firelight, the dinner gong, the Christmas crackers there with hats for each belonging. Hear the Grace, taste the feast, see the gifts, smell the woodstove firing. Yell my silly cousins down the years, chasing down the stairs. Grandfather tall and wise and silent and strong as a grandfather ought to be and Grandmother small and tidy and busy and fun as grandmothers always were. And all was well and all was right as *always* was on Christmas night. And after everything there was calm. There was peace. And going home, there was the winter night sky, grey and cold and still as iron, and the humming road to sleep.

And somehow, no matter how many years pass, that house to me *is* Christmas and always will be. And now that it is gone, it will always be the place that I am *from*. But it has dawned on me lately that beside that beloved house there is another little building

that I never really saw , thank God, in former time. I have begun to see what I always took for granted before, that Grandma's house, ramshackle and homely as it was, and stocked with all the old fashioned inconveniences, was a place to stay, safe and certain and somehow perfect. But it occurs to me now that there was another Christmas house in back of that one that I never saw before (though now I think of it, I am sure that my Grandparents both had spent a few Christmases in it).

You see, I think, I feel that I had mistaken the celebrations of Christmas for the Christ Mass itself. I had been thinking that Christ's birth itself is all about safety and certainty and feasting and perfection and plenty. The fact is that there has always been a room at the inn for me, always a groaning board, a wassailing bowl, a feasting, a carolling. But that is not Christmas. In fact Christmas is not inside the inn at all. Christmas is out in the barn, the shed, the shelter, the what have you, the 'whatever you can find' that Jesus' homeless parents found to have Him in. And I know now that my Grandparents had been *there* too.

It goes without saying that there are certain other tales that we have to have at Christmas. You know the ones: "A Christmas Carol" in some form or other, the everlasting "It's a Wonderful

Life" is broadcast every year, even the 'Grinch who stole it' is required at Christmas, not to mention "Love Actually" and probably dozens of others. It is very striking to me that none of these films is about birth or child rearing or babes in swaddling clothes or the like. They are not children's stories at all really, most of them, though we've known them since childhood. But the funny thing is how similar they all are. And when you place them alongside the Gospel stories, as we do every year, you begin to realize how *well* they retell it. But strangely, the part of the gospel that they most resemble is not so much the beginning of Jesus' life as the end. If you look closely, you'll see that they are not tales of birth so much as they are of rebirth, and re-awakening, and resurrection. Each of the heroes, be he Ebenezer Scrooge, or George Bailey, or well, okay, even the Grinch, each loses his soul, his mind, his life, his heart, whatever it is and regains it through some sort of limit experience, which brings an encounter with the divine. Each remembers who he is, recovers what's important, is restored to wholeness. These stories are so telling for us because they are so familiar. We have been there, done that. And will do so again. Alongside and through Christ's birth we are celebrating the fact that again and again God has found *us* in the cow shed and we have been re-born.

But let's face it, we can't regain what we never lost and that is the adult story of Christmas: that we lose the innocent perfection of former times, except in memory, and sometimes, to some of us, it seems only our children or grandchildren can get it back. It can sometimes feel as though they are in the Inn while we are in the stable. And we are glad of that. But somehow, once we have left the inn and found the stable, there is a place of simplicity we come to in which a whole new kind of perfect innocence is possible - and perfect celebration. It is out back here, in this little Christmas place that Christ will be reborn again this year. Not where we meant him to be born, not in the five star perfection of our Christmas ideal, but here, now. A place of nakedness, of vulnerability, of tiny flames kindled against the cold and the darkness, it is a place of awesome wonder, this rough sawn stopping place on our required journey. We would not have planned to come here. We *had* planned to go someplace much tidier, safer, better furnished. Yet miraculously, here we are. Smelling hay and animals and childbirth and thanking God that we *have* found our way. Or that He has found us, found our way, *His* way to us here.

We begin to forget the petty distinctions we fussed over back when we took for granted our room at the inn. We may suddenly

remember the times and places and ways of our own poverty and we cease to look down on the poor unfortunates around us. We realize that we are one with them. Like Scrooge and Bailey and um, Grinch, we suddenly remember who we are and where we come from. We become grateful for what and who we have and try again to accept them as they are. We find a new kind of "ought to be" and "always was." And the Christmas Child becomes once again for us not just the rejected one, not just the poor one in the stable, but also the Beloved Brother, The Christ, The Wisdom of the Ages, The Word of God's Creation:

¶ the Word [who] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

His light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.