



Christmas Day 25 December 2012

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Isaiah 52: 7-10; Ps 98; Heb 1: 1-4; John 1: 1-14

I love Christmas. It's a time for doing really important things, like checking out every plate of mince-pies you see, to find the perfect specimen. And it's a time for telling stories, so today I'm going to tell three stories for Christmas – and they are stories for the children as well as the adults. So here's my first story.

If you've seen the film of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or better still read the book, you'll know it tells about four children (Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy) who find their way – through a wardrobe – into another world, a country called Narnia. And this country is in the depths of winter, with thick snow on the ground and covering the trees, and a leaden sky, and that peculiar silence you get when it snows: no birds sing, no one moves. The land has been placed under a spell by the White Witch, and so it's always winter – always winter and never Christmas, imagine that!

It's a cold and dead place, where the animals are gripped by fear. But as the children explore they come across some friendly beavers, who tell them things might be about to change, because they've heard that "Aslan is on the move". Now, the children don't yet know who Aslan is, but as they hear the name a strange feeling comes over them: Peter feels strong and capable of anything; Susan feels as if she's listening to beautiful music; Lucy feels like you do when you wake up and it's the first day of the holidays; but Edmund feels a sense of mysterious horror. Somehow the very name of Aslan shows them who they are and who they are becoming.

Edmund doesn't yet know that he is going to betray them all to the White Witch – but he is – and so, some time later, the three children are running away cross the snow, pursued by Edmund and the White Witch.

But something has changed. Aslan the Lion, the King, the Lord of the Wood, has come back into the land and the world changes. They begin to hear in the wintry silence the drip of snow melting on the trees; they hear birdsong; they see flowers open before their eyes and the sky turn blue; they hear running streams – until the White Witch's sledge grinds to a halt and her driver says, "This is no thaw, this is *Spring*". Aslan the Lion has come back and the Witch's power is crumbling; the beauty of the world is returning.

You'll have to read the rest of the book to find what happens next.

My second story is quite different and it takes place, not in Narnia but in New South Wales. I was over there a year ago to lead a retreat for six people about to be ordained in the Diocese of Newcastle, and at the start of the weekend I asked them to talk about how they each came to be there. One young man told how he'd become a Christian: how seven years before he'd gone out drinking with his friends on Christmas Eve, and when he came back he was sitting alone, too tired to go to bed, flicking through the TV channels in search of something to distract or entertain him. One channel was showing Midnight Mass from a Catholic church. He flicked on to it in the middle of the Gospel procession – clouds of incense – and the reading was the Prologue of St John's Gospel which we have just heard proclaimed:

“In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God and the Word was God
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” [John 1: 1, 14]

He was captivated by the magnificence and mystery of it, and he said, “That's it! That's it!” It set him off on a path of exploration to discover the meaning of this Gospel message, a path which led him, years later, to be about to be ordained as a Deacon in the Church of God.

And it is a text of great wonder, which tells the story of the Incarnation, not through the imagery of angels and stars, but by tracing it back to its origin in something which happened before the world's creation, when God spoke a Word, *the Word*, the Word which expressed God's very Being. And so that Word was God (as your words are you) and yet was also now *with* God. This Word expressed who God is – loving, creating energy – and so it was in and through this energy of love that all things came to be, and it's with this life that the universe is alive. Even we are alive with the life of this living Word, the one who the Letter to the Hebrews calls “the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very Being” [Heb 1: 3]. It is the glory stitched into our flesh and our bones.

And yet we don't know it. There is something winterish about the human heart. History as well as the Bible tells how humanity in particular turns from God, leaving God (as in the story of Eden) to wander in the garden saying, “Where are you?” while humanity hides itself in fear.

And so it was, until God chose to make himself – in his Word, his Son – present in human form, becoming flesh of our flesh. In that extraordinary paradox, the eternal and indestructible Word became for our sake fragile and transient flesh, revealing the glory of God in human form, AND revealing the glory which is always embedded in the human form by the divine Word who shapes us and gives us life. In Jesus, child and adult, we see who God is, and who we might be.

To know what happens next in this story you'll have to search your own heart.

And here's my third story for Christmas. It goes like this [paraphrased from Margaret Silf: *One hundred Wisdom stories*, pp.59-60; she attributes it to Hans Christian Andersen].

We know how Satan loves causing confusion in our world. One way Satan thought to do this was to have a special mirror made, a distorting mirror, which made all the ugly things look big and beautiful, and all the good things look small and insignificant. So Satan went around the world, holding this mirror in front of people's eyes, until everybody took on this distorted view of the world. Satan laughed and laughed at the mess people were getting into with this upside down view of reality, and one day he laughed so much he dropped the mirror. It smashed into millions of pieces. Then the wind came and blew these fragments all round the world and they stuck in people's eyes and became a kind of lens, until all they could see was the evil things, which looked rather fine, while the good and beautiful things almost disappeared.

God was very sad when he saw how people's vision had become so distorted, till they could hardly see the goodness of the world any more. Then God had an idea. He said, "My Son is the mirror of me, my exact reflection. I'll send him into the world. He will reflect my goodness and my justice, and he will show the world as I long for it to be."

And so God sent Jesus, to be a mirror for people. He showed the goodness of God and God's world to the sick and the sad, to outcasts, even to thieves and betrayers and people whose hearts were filled with evil. He gave people courage, and he gave comfort to the grieving, and when their hearts were crippled by fear he gave them hope. People loved Jesus and crowded round him to look in this mirror. But others were jealous, and could not bear to have their view of the world, and their power over others, threatened by the love of God. They plotted against Jesus and killed him. They took God's mirror and smashed it.

But when they did that, a great storm blew up. It picked up the millions of fragments of God's mirror and blew them all round the world. And the fragments lodged in the eyes of many people, so they could see the world as Jesus saw it, filled with beauty and goodness. They even looked at themselves and saw how good and beautiful they were in Jesus' eyes. And they saw that everything evil and ugly *can* be overcome and *will* pass away, as the beauty of God fills the whole world.

May the wonder and beauty of God fill your vision and your heart at this Christmas time.