

My Experience as a Christian at Christmas.

Joy Allan

As a Christmas baby, the smell of pine needles and the sight of fairy lights elicit memories both good and bad for me. Memories of carols sung and stockings hung, words read and poems said, but also of the onslaught of the dreaded 'Christmas cold' and stress headaches exuding from every pore. Memories of the constant questions, self-recrimination and doubt: Have I bought the correct present? Have I spent too much? Have I spent too little? Do I have time to celebrate my birthday *and* Christmas? It wasn't until I was 24 and in active Christian ministry that I felt that I really understood what it meant to be a Christian at Christmas, and the difference which that made for my relationship to a feast which is so widely celebrated.

In the year of 2008, working for a church in a city far away from my home town left me slightly devoid of the usual traditions of kith and kin, detached from them both physically and emotionally. It was my duty to prepare talks for *Christingle* services, Carol services, School Assemblies, Midnight Mass and Christmas festivities in my local community. It was my duty to watch the faces of small children grow wide with joy as they were greeted anew with the story of Christmas, the wonder of the stars, the angels, the king born into poverty and war, and the rapture and beauty of knowing that story. It was my duty to sing carols and read tales as ancient as they are awe-inspiring and share them with my community in Aberdeen. It was my duty, but it grew into my joy. I have appreciated the richness and depth of our Christmas traditions every year since.

As I travelled throughout my twenties, I discovered new ways, more Catholic than my own Protestant upbringing to celebrate this holy feast. The feast of *Immacolata* (17 days before Christmas) which celebrates the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, has always held a special significance for me. The first time I experienced it I was a fledgling in a new country, isolated in the pain of linguistic loneliness. For, I had arrived two months prior with only two sentences of their language. On that feast day, around a table of Pentecostals (not supposed to celebrate such days, yet always ready to celebrate nonetheless) I suddenly began to speak with fluency and ease, to great joy and celebration. Loud shouts greeted my flow of words, and tumbled questions fired out in quick succession. 'Who are you?' 'Why are you here?' 'What brought you to our table?' 'Tell us your story...' I felt as though *I* were born on Immacolata, in that new land. I told story after story to a rapt table of Italian friends. My story felt as though it were weaving into the story of the faithful around me, which was in turn weaving itself around our narration of ancient scripture. It reminded me of my Jewish friends at their *shabbat* meals, re-telling the story of their exile and rescue, gathered around a table. This reminds me in turn of my favourite Christmas carol of all, 'O come Emmanuel.' An ancient tale of exile and rescue, in spirit, scripture and song reverberating through the Christmas story.

The strains of that, my favourite carol, have echoed through years in ministry and travel and have accompanied me back into my old haunt of Aberdeen where I am a currently working and studying. This Christmas, the words of that tune echoed through our Cathedral to the sight of candles, the sound of words of scripture read in local dialect, before the kind eyes of our Chaplaincy team and local community. It was a different setting, but the same tune, the same story. A story of a King born in a stable, of the fear and poverty which surrounded him and the joy and power which came in his apparent weakness and defeat. For me, that song is Christmas, and the singing of it my experience of that feast. I love it still, and find that the strain of its song reminds me of what Christmas means to me as a Christian. I still suffer from the stress headaches, the socialising and the angst which goes with the materialism which threatens to submerge a religious feast, but when I

listen to those ancient chords and hear the ancient calls of pilgrimage, exile and *Emmanuel, God with us*, I feel the telling of that story entwined around a faithful community of friends and their stories, and I am at peace. That is my experience of Christmas as a Christian. Living it amongst my community, telling that story together in scripture and song by the light of Christmas candles is my greatest joy.