

The Real Christmas

by

Diana Kimpton

Father Brian was tired of Christmases. He'd seen forty of them since he became a priest: forty cribs, forty Advent candles and, worst of all, forty Christmas sermons. He crumpled another piece of paper and threw it to join the growing pile beside his desk. It was six o'clock on Christmas Eve and he still hadn't got a fresh idea for this year's sermon.

It wasn't that he had lost his faith – that still burned bright within him. He just felt disillusioned, as if no one but him still cared about the true meaning of Christmas. Of course, people still came to church at the festive season to sing carols about angels and shepherds, but he felt they only came out of tradition, out of habit. Many would not attend church again until next December. Father Brian hadn't lost his faith in God, just his faith in people.

It was the children who upset him most. Brainwashed by the media from September onwards to demand expensive toys, they seemed more interested in what they could get than in what they could give. The Christ Child had been pushed out of Christmas by an old man with a red coat and a few flying reindeer.

The old priest threw down his pen in disgust. It was no use just sitting getting nowhere - a walk would do him more good. Perhaps the fresh air was clear his thoughts.

The streets were quiet after the rush of the last few weeks. Most people were at home now preparing for the feast to come, the last of the shopping finally finished. As he walked, Father Brian grumbled at God in the way one does to an old and valued friend. "There are times, Lord," he began, "when I feel I am wasting my breath. Does it even matter what I say in church? Is anyone out there listening?"

As he came to the church, he stepped inside to check that everything was ready for the service. That was his excuse anyway. In reality, he knew he was just delaying returning to his writing.

The church was empty, waiting quietly for the rush of people who would fill it in a few hours for Midnight Mass. Those people would expect a sermon, even though their minds would wander during it. But he still had no idea what to say. He paused by the crib as if that might give him inspiration.

The model stable had been the centre of the children's service a few hours earlier. To the accompaniment of the old, familiar story, the children had lifted the figures into place – all the well-known characters of the Nativity except one. By tradition, the baby would not be placed in the manger until midnight.

He stopped and looked again. Something was wrong. Mary and Joseph had vanished. Only two depressions in the straw showed where they had been. "Oh, Lord," he cried. "This is too much. What is the world coming to that even the Christmas crib is not safe from thieves?"

The police did nothing to improve Father Brian's good humour. He knew it was hardly a case for Special Branch, but he had expected more manpower than the overweight sergeant who eventually puffed his way up the drive. Although the officer apologised for the apparent lack of interest, his comment that the bank raid in town was more urgent than the theft of two old plaster models did not go down well with the priest. Neither did his insinuations that the whole business was Father Brian's fault for leaving the church unlocked.

It was eight o'clock by the time the sergeant had left, and the old priest was about to settle again to his writing when the phone rang. He seized it angrily. Was there to be no peace that evening? A nervous voice declared itself to belong to Mrs Reynolds, mother of six-year-old Daniel, self-appointed terror of the Sunday school.

"I'm ever so sorry," she began. "It's our Daniel. I don't know what made him do it."

"Do what?"

"Oh, I'm ever so sorry. He's got Mary and Joseph. He must brought them home stuffed up his jumper."

"Are they all right?"

"Yes, he hasn't hurt them. Oh, I'm ever so sorry."

"I'll come right over," Father Brian said quickly, trying to stop her being ever so sorry again. "Please leave it to me. I'd like to deal with this myself." Yes, he thought to himself, I'll give this little hooligan a piece of my mind. I'll teach him not to mess around with other people's things.

He threw on his coat and scrabbled through the muddle on the sideboard, looking for his car keys. His hand fell on a small package wrapped in tissue paper which he thrust deep into his coat pocket, determined to prevent that going missing as well. Finally finding the misplaced keys, he sped off through the dark, his feelings for Daniel far from the peace and goodwill appropriate to the season.

The Reynolds' house was gay with decorations and full of the sweet smell of baking. A crestfallen Mrs Reynolds greeted Father Brian at the door with Daniel peeking nervously from behind her, his face white with the expectation of punishment.

“So this is the culprit,” thundered Father Brian in what he always called his best doom and damnation voice. “Right then. You’d better show me what you have done with them, and I hope for your sake they are all right.”

Daniel led the way up the stairs to his bedroom. Father Brian followed close behind, resisting the temptation to hold the child by his ear. Even under these circumstances, he was sure Mrs Reynolds would not have approved.

The bedroom was just as he would have expected it except there was an extra bed on the floor – a temporary one fashioned from cushions, a tartan rug and an overcoat. Judging by the teddy bears and the stocking waiting for Father Christmas, it seemed that this was the one where Daniel planned to spend the night.

Father Brian glanced at the bed again and saw that it was not quite as empty as he had first thought. Tenderly tucked under the quilt with their heads nestling on the pillow were Mary and Joseph.

“Why did you do it?” He asked the boy who was shifting nervously from foot to foot. His voice was gentler now as if for the first time he realised how young the child was.

Daniel hesitated, looking at the floor, and then said quietly, “I didn’t want to hurt anyone. It just wasn’t right.”

“What wasn’t?”

“Jesus not having a proper place to be born, not having a proper bed. I wanted him to have mine. I can manage on the floor.”

For a moment, Father Brian could say nothing. The lectures he had practised on the journey were not designed for this moment of childish innocence. Then he smiled and muffled Daniel’s hair in that way so popular with childless people. “Well, in that case,” he said, “we’d better let him use your gift properly.”

He pulled the small package from his pocket and carefully unwrapped the layers of tissue paper to reveal the figure of the Christ Child. He looked at it carefully, remembering how he should be placing in the manger tonight at Midnight Mass. They would have to manage without it just this once, he thought.

The old man took the boy's hand and together they placed the baby between his parents in the borrowed bed. As he tucked the quilt around the little figure, the words of his sermon finally tumbled into his mind. At midnight, he would tell the people that the real Christmas still exists if you look through the eyes of a child.

* * * * *

© Diana Kimpton

You can find out more about Diana and her books at

www.dianakimpton.co.uk