

TFTD December 10th



Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

Isaiah 35: 5-6

Reindeer

Am I the only one who was raised with fixed ideas about Christmas traditions?

I freely admit that I am not an expert on Santa – or his reindeer. When we were children, he was crowded out of our family Christmas Eve preparations: digging up the Christmas tree, decorating the house, wrapping presents, stuffing the turkey, preparing those dreaded sprouts – and of course the Carols from Kings College! The only nod to Father Christmas was a sock at the end of the bed which was miraculously filled with a tangerine, chocolate coins and pocket-sized goodies – maybe a Dinky Toy car or one those impossible ball-bearing mazes to improve our hand/eye coordination.

Later in life I worked in the Netherlands and was introduced to their tradition of Sinter Klaas (St Nicolas) celebrated on 5/6th December. Nicolas was the bishop of Myra, in what is now Turkey. He became known as the patron saint of children. As all Dutch children know he now lives in Spain and rides a horse to distribute gifts and joy to children and their families. (They have the added encouragement to be good during the year or the mischievous helper Piet might put them into his sack...) Settlers in the New World translated this tradition into Santa. The tradition is different but the basic message the same.

Moving on to reindeer, or their cousins. My immediate thoughts would go to memories of roe deer in the New Forest – shy, gentle and graceful; or the red deer and reindeer you sometimes see when walking in the Cairngorms in Scotland – surefooted and fearless in the

wide-open spaces of that rugged terrain. Or the beautiful illustrations of deer in David's song of thanksgiving, later echoed by the prophet Habakkuk:

For who is God, but the Lord?
And who is a rock, except our God?
The God who has girded me with strength
has opened wide my path.
He made my feet like the feet of deer,
and set me secure on the heights.
(2 Samuel 23:32-34)

These deer appear to be valued more for being agile, fearless and surefooted, than for the brightness of their noses....

The association of Santa and reindeer seems to go back 200 years, first to a poem 'A new year's present', then the original eight reindeer are named in a 'A Visit from St. Nicholas' by Clement Clark Moore. The story of Rudolf was a much later addition, then immortalised in Montgomery Ward's song. Rudolf's experience as an outsider mirrored that of the author who was short and mercilessly bullied at school. Rudolf was a misfit with a bright, red nose, (not in Santa's reindeer tradition) so he was excluded by the others. But a foggy night changed his life. Santa asked for his help – his bright red nose would help to show the way. Rudolf was gracious, he did not let the previous rejection get in the way, and the other reindeer soon learned that diversity in the team was a 'good thing'. They clearly embraced this new tradition – Santa's deliveries continue today!

Do we sometimes let our tradition limit us in outlook and our lives?

Imagine if the shepherds on that hillside 2000 years ago had not responded to the invitation of the angels to go into town to visit the new-born king – "It is not really our sort of thing", "it will be difficult to keep the sheep together" or if the 'wise men' had decided not to follow that star "because it was not on their map of the heavens".

After the limitations of 2020, many of us can look forward to being together as families and communities to celebrate Christmas. While the government is encouraging us to celebrate Christmas 'as usual' – supporting the economy with conspicuous consumption – let's not forget the lessons we learned last year. The anticipation, and sheer joy, of social contact; and the need to watch out for those on the outside, on their own or struggling with life. The core of Christmas does not change. Jesus came to earth to be with us. He knew what it was to be on the outside – he spent his early years in exile, he came from Nazareth, he lived under occupation, he associated with socially questionable people. And he is still with us today whatever our circumstances. Let's not allow our celebrations to close our eyes and ears to his presence with us.

A year on, I still may not be able to leap quite as well as the deer in Isaiah, but this year I will be able to open my (masked) mouth and sing for joy – in the company of others. I must also try to remember to keep an eye out for Santa and those reindeer.

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