

THE REASON FOR THE SEASON: CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS

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'[Jesus] the Word [of God] was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory ...' (John 1: 14)

Houses, shops and churches all around us are telling the Christmas story, but basically in two different versions. In our parish communities our story is about the birth of the child Jesus at Bethlehem, about the loving and caring presence of his parents Mary and Joseph, and about the visits, first by the shepherds and their animals, and later, by the three kings from the East. But the brightly-lit houses and shops in our streets tell the story of Santa and Mrs Claus, their reindeer and their sleigh, packed with presents for good children. Both stories of Christmas though, even if in such different ways, share some of the same message. Christmas is about being together. And it is about generosity, love, peace and joy.

We are followers of Jesus. But we live in a society where many other persons have different religious beliefs or none at all. The result is that some of our nation's schools, out of respect for non-Christians, exclude any reference to the stable of Bethlehem in their break-up celebrations. Beth, mother of six year old Nicholas, recalls what happened recently at her son's state school.

For weeks Nicholas had been memorizing songs for what his teacher called the *'Holiday Pageant'*. His mother could not get to her son's performance on the night since she was working, but she did get to the full dress rehearsal the same day. She reached the school gym ten minutes early, found a spot on the floor in front of the makeshift stage, and watched each class, led by their teacher, take their places around the room, until called to the stage to sing or dance or both.

Because a couple of years ago the school had stopped even using the word *'Christmas'* – a word, incidentally, which literally means *'Christ-Mass'* – Beth was expecting only songs about jingle bells, reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes, fun and good cheer. So when Nicholas' class rose to sing a song that was announced as *'Christmas love'*, Beth could hardly believe her ears.

There on the stage her son was glowing with joy, as were all his classmates, all decked out in their fur mittens, red tops, and white snow-caps. As the class was to sing *'C is for Christmas'*, a child would hold up high the letter *'C'*. The next child would hold up *'H is for happy'* and so on, until all the cards spelt out the complete message *'Christmas Love'*.

That was the plan, but Beth reports what actually happened:

The performance was going smoothly until suddenly we noticed her – a small shy girl in the front row holding the letter 'M' upside down. She was totally unaware her letter 'M' appeared as a 'W'. The audience, mainly of other

school children, started giggling at the little one's mistake. But she had no idea they were laughing at her. So she stood tall, proudly holding up her 'W'.

Beth goes on:

Although many teachers tried to shush the children, the laughter continued until the last letter was raised. Then we all saw it together. A hush came over the audience, and eyes began to widen. In that instant we understood the reason we were there, and why even in the chaos and confusion, there was a good reason for all our joy and fun.

For when the last letter was held up high the message read loud and clear: 'CHRISTWAS LOVE!'

He still is, we believe!

God certainly works in mysterious ways.

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