

Memories of Christmas- you're making them right now- memories of Christmas are generally warm and happy excited and tired, at least mine are. Happy memories of happy times, turkey and tinsel, presents and parties, cranberry sauce and carol singing, sleigh bells and snowstorms, though the last two are probably false memories as we haven't had a white christmas since the 60s and even in the worst of winters there's never enough snow to make it worthwhile investing in a sleigh. Still, happy Christmas, happy times, and though I'm a sarcastic old mug sheltering behind a hard cynical carapace if I take her hand and go off skipping with the ghost of Christmas past I inevitably come over all dewy eyed and sentimental in a 'Merry Christmas Mr Cratchet' sort of way. There is a little wrinkle in the gaudy wrapping paper of my memories though, one little hiccup in the glass of memory-mulled wine, a minor childhood trauma that mars my remembrance of Dickensian delight. Nothing major, but remembrance of it still it clings to my recollection as tenaciously as Theresa May to the keys of number 10.

So, it was some time in the early 70s. The tale involves me and... a round orange plastic cat money box placed in a stocking of presents at the bottom of my bed on Christmas morning. As I was both a poor and spendthrift child this gift of a money box was destined to remain forever empty. It didn't start empty however, it was in two halves and when separated, inside was a plastic bag of an indistinct greyish powder. Twenty years later I might have reasoned that someone had been using a consignment of children's toys to smuggle drugs: it was in fact bath salts which still seems to me a fairly odd thing to put in a child's toy. Back then my highly excited yet sleep deprived mind surmised that what this substance was, was in fact ashes. Huh? You might ask. In which case you're not aware that every northern 70s child knew, if they had spent the year being naughty, then Santa brought not presents, but ashes.

So... my parents were greeted at 5 am that Christmas morning not by the usual hyper-excited child, but a highly distraught one convinced that, alas, he had indeed been caught out as the bad child he was and Christmas this year would be something unpleasantly gothically vindictive, just like a Grimm's fairy tale. Had I not been quite so sleep deprived from Christmas eve excitement, I might have worked out that it would be a bit odd if you were going to give a child ashes for Christmas to hide them in a stocking full of toys, but Christmas morning, young, tired and emotional. What can you expect?

There, then, is a cautionary tale for parents everywhere. Don't tell your children cautionary tales of the 'if the wind changes your face will stay that way' (I know that explains the faces of most politicians, but still) or 'if you swallow chewing gum it will

tangle up your insides and you will die' (in which case it would hardly be on sale in every corner shop, would it?), or indeed 'Santa brings bad children ashes for Christmas (because everybody knows that Santa doesn't ex... .. do horrible things to children). No cautionary tales. Unless of course you really enjoy being woken upon Christmas morning two hours into your sleep by a child's hysterical screaming.

What Santa actually does when it comes to deciding what presents he distributes, I don't know, but a part of me thinks that whatever gifts he bring might have more to do with what money can be scraped together rather than the good behaviour or moral rectitude of the recipients (though possibly he might like to think about making an exception for choristers. Well nothing else has worked.)

Which is probably where we leave Santa today. After all, if he's been working to the rule book he's done with Beddington and has long since taken the reindeer ride west in search of American chimneys. And anyway, in the Christmas tradition Santa is only a very late added-extra and certainly not part of the original line-up.

However, what Santa brings- gifts- have always been part of the Christmas set up. On a simplistic level there's the gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts of the Magi, dripping rich with symbolism, for sure, but something of an afterthought to the tale. They followed the star, they visited Herod, they found the babe in the manger, worshipped him and *then* oops, almost forgot, had a rummage round in their treasure chests for some last minute pressies. A bit like those people who carry round a blank Christmas card to fill in just in case they meet somebody they'd forgotten to send one to.

Much more than medicine, sweet-smelling smoke and bling there is the gift that *is* the Christmas story, the gift lying in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes and the label reading 'For you!' : God's gift to humanity of Himself. *That* is all of what Christmas is about and what Christmas is all about.

And here's the really important bit, the bit that takes us back all of five minutes to the beginning of this sermon, to Santa's lists, naughty kids, ashes for the bad and pressies for the good.

The gift that babe in the manger is, the gift of God himself is for everybody and the gift of Christmas is *particularly* for bad people. The gift of Christmas is *especially* for the people who've spent the year being naughty, not nice. They- we -get to unwrap that parcel first.

Not that that is an encouragement to misbehaviour. Not that that's a green light to naughtiness and a 'who care's?' to niceness. I hope the choir's still listening. But a big part of the happiness that makes the celebration of Christmas so special, so joyful is that when we grow up and do all those things that we know we shouldn't do and try our best not to but somehow just can't stop ourselves doing; when through negligence, weakness, or our own deliberate fault we err and stray like lost sheep and end up where we really never wanted to be, when we go so badly off course, God's gift of himself will still be there for us.

The promise of Jesus is one gift that will never turn to ashes in our hands, the promise of God-with-us is one gift that will always keep on giving. No longer dust and ashes, but future citizens of Heaven. Happy Christmas.