



A VERY

DIFFERENT
Christmas



.....
WHAT ARE YOU



HOPING FOR

~ THIS YEAR? ~

.....
RICO TICE

— and —

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A Very Different Christmas

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*For Lucy, Cat and Grace –
thank you.*



ALL ABOUT THE PRESENTS

..... *Chapter One*

According to my wife, I buy Christmas presents that are spontaneous, expensive, and not particularly useful.

I think that's her kind way of saying that my gift-buying is poorly planned, overpriced, and unhelpful. She's learned not to hope for great things when she unwraps her present from me. There's always a wry smile—or perhaps it's a resigned smile—on her face as she opens it.

There seem to be two types of people when it comes to Christmas shopping. The first type start preparing the previous June, and by October their purchases are all made. They can spend December relaxing, looking forward to Christmas, and wrapping all those thoughtful, helpful, well-priced gifts they've already bought.

The second type swear every January that they will become one of the first type, but they never do. I'm in this camp. We first start preparing—and panicking—on about 18th December, and the next week is spent racing around, hoping someone might push Christmas back a week, and buying all those spontaneous, expensive, not-particularly-useful-but-at-least-I've-got-something presents. I don't know which type you are—if the first, have pity on the rest of us, and if the second, I know your pain.

But whichever type you are, everyone knows that a big part of Christmas is the presents. It always has been, from the first time you lay awake as a child on Christmas Eve, checking the time every hour to find that in fact only two minutes had passed since you last checked. Adults always tell children that it's about the giving, not the receiving, but kids don't tend to fall for that. Then you grow up and discover that there is some joy in giving as well as receiving—and, if you're a Type Two person, you also discover that there's great relief in having found something to give.

But along with the desperate sprint around the shops to get the presents, there's also the question of where you'll open them, and who'll be there when you do. For some, Christmas is a diplomatic challenge with the potential to start a small family war. Particularly if you have children, there

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are too many living rooms with Christmas trees and relatives sitting around who want you to join them. You can't be everywhere at once, and so you have to remember who you were with last year, appease someone with the offer of a Boxing Day visit, and hope you can avert a crisis. It's a diplomatic tangle the British Foreign Office and US State Department combined would struggle to straighten out.

For some, though, Christmas Day isn't about panicked shopping or tricky diplomacy. It's about quiet disappointment, or even desperation. To borrow from Charles Dickens, Christmas is both the best of times and the worst of times. It's a time of joy and loneliness, of excitement and despair, often within the same family and even in the same heart.

For so many of us, there's a lot of sadness wrapped up with the tinsel each Christmas; there's grief nestled among the presents. My children will be three and five this Christmas, and there will be such joy in watching them open their presents (my wife will buy them, so they'll be well-planned, good value, and just what they want). But there will also be sadness, because my mother—who loved planning, wrapping and giving presents—was always the cornerstone of our Christmas, and she won't be there this year. So many of us, even as we open our gifts, are aware of the empty chair

at the table, or are crushed because we're the only person there. For some of us, at one level we're just hoping to make it through this December.

I don't know where you'll spend Christmas Day, or who you'll spend it with. I don't know whether you're looking forward to it, or longing to get it over with. But in this book, I want you to imagine something a little weird, but something that is also wonderful. Something that can make sense of the panic, the tensions, the fun, the sadness and the joy. I want you to imagine that it's Christmas morning, and you've been invited to an amazing living room to open the presents. It's not yours, nor is it your relatives'.

It's heaven's.

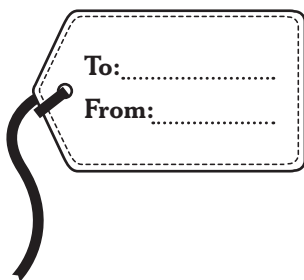
As you go in, you see the tree, with the presents underneath. And in this celestial living room is you, and God. Which means that as you enter the room, there are three others already in there; because God, mysteriously, is one God and three Persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This view of God is hard to get your head around—but, according to the Bible, it's reality. Each of those Persons is fully God, and different from each other, and united in one God. It's what is sometimes called the Trinity.

I can't get my head round that, and I imagine you can't either—and I want to say right at the start that we never will fully comprehend this, and

actually that's ok. It would be a very small, limited and slightly disappointing God whose nature our human minds could fully understand. It's exciting that God is bigger and more mysterious than any god we could imagine or make up. And this book is about that God—the God who is more interesting, wonderful, and at times challenging than the gods we dream up.

And it's with this God in his heavenly living room that you're spending Christmas Day this year. It's a very different place to visit for Christmas. There they are—the eternal, divine One Family of Father, Son and Spirit. And there are some gifts, under the tree. It turns out that Christmas, even in heaven, is all about the presents—the presents under the Trinity's tree.

This is a book about God, and you, and four gifts.



By the way, whenever you see "I" or "me" in this book, it always means "Rico".



THE FATHER'S GIFT

..... Chapter Two

So there you are, in heaven's living room with God on Christmas Day, and God the Father says, *Let me go first. I'm going to give my gift, and it's for...* and he looks in your direction... you.

And you're thinking, *Well, what's God going to give me for Christmas?! What's he got me? He's the all-powerful, all-knowing God, he can give me anything!*

IF I COULD HAVE ANYTHING...

What would you like to be given by God? If you could have anything, what would it be? The story is told of a radio-show host in Washington, DC who rang round some ambassadors from various countries in the run-up to Christmas one year, asking them what they would most like for Christmas.

The French ambassador was first to pick up. His answer? “Peace and goodwill to all men.”

Next on the list was the Chinese ambassador. He thought for a moment and then said, “I’d like an end to hunger and disease throughout the world.”

Then the radio show host called the British embassy, and was put through to the ambassador. “What would you most like for Christmas, Mr Ambassador?”

“I’d be very happy with some aftershave and a new pair of slippers.”

Most of us, if we could have anything, would ask for far more than the ability to smell good and have warm feet. What would you ask for? A loved one back, to share Christmas with again? Honestly, I’d give almost anything to have my mother back with us.

Or maybe we’d be a bit more materialistic—a ten-million-pound house would be great. Or perhaps we’d ask for the dream job. Or the dream body, or relationship, or holiday, or pension.

Perhaps, though, we should be a bit more unselfish. I mean, this is God’s present to us. So he really could give us world peace. He really could end hunger and disease. Maybe that’s what’s in this gift that God the Father is holding out to you! So you take the present, and you start to unwrap it, and you look inside, and what is it?

A baby.

That's it? A baby? And it's not even a baby who'll live with you, but one who lived in history, 2,000 years ago. God could give you anything, and he gives you a baby? Does he know what he's doing?!

Yes, he does.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Here's how the Father gave the world a baby, and why this baby is special, in the words of one of the men who wrote a biography of that baby (once he'd grown up, obviously):

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and

give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

(Matthew chapter 1, verses 18-23)

Did you notice the two names of the baby that God has given as his present to the world? There’s the one we’re more familiar with—Jesus—and another that is mentioned much more rarely—Immanuel. But we need to wrap our heads round what Immanuel means: God with us.

When God gave us this baby, he was giving us himself. Mary’s son was not Joseph’s son (that’s why he nearly divorced her)—he was God the Father’s Son. He was Immanuel—God living in this world, God walking on the pages of human history.

WHY IMMANUEL MATTERS

This is the difference between a general experience of God, and really experiencing God. We can sense God’s divine power, if we choose to. Have you ever stood on the shore of an ocean, and seen its vast expanse, and watched the power of breaking waves? Or looked up at the sky on a clear night and been awed by the number and magnitude of the stars and galaxies? Many of us, when we do that, sense that the power that made all that, if there is one, must be immense. It’s a general experience, and possibly a fleeting experience, of God.

But with the Father's gift of Immanuel—with the Son's arrival as a baby—we have received something much more precious. God identifies with us. God came to us. It's extraordinary, when you think about it. Not only did God's Son come as a person, he came as a *baby*—completely vulnerable, completely open, completely dependent. The hands that crafted the stars at the beginning of everything now reached up for a cuddle. The one who sustains the cosmos needed to be cleaned and changed. That's how God came to us, to our world—he gave himself, as a baby.

This is such great news. Why? Because Immanuel means that we can have *clarity*.

Is there a God, or gods, or nothing? What is God, or what are the gods, like? Left to ourselves, your guess is as good as mine. No one can know for sure. We have to base our lives on a guess.

Then a baby was born about whom an angel said, "What is conceived . . . is from the Holy Spirit". He grew up to prove by what he said and all he did that he really is God-with-us. And so the guessing games can stop. The only person who can give us clarity about the existence and character of God is . . . God. And God proved his existence by his appearance, and showed his character on the pages of human history. He came to a world of guessers and said, *Here I am*. If God hadn't revealed himself, to claim we can't be clear about

him would be humble. Since God has revealed himself, to claim we can't be clear about him is arrogant. Immanuel gives us clarity about the big questions of life.

So for instance, Immanuel means that we know there is *eternity*. There is more to life than what we can see, and there is more to life than this life. Have you ever wondered what, if anything, lies beyond? Ever thought that there must be more to life than this? Ever grasped something that everyone said would make you happy, but the happiness faded? The atheist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once said:

“There comes a time when one asks, even of Shakespeare, even of Beethoven, ‘Is that all there is?’”

God-with-us says to us, *No, there is much, much more. You were made for eternity, and eternity is where you can find the satisfaction that eludes you now.* As C.S. Lewis, the writer of the Narnia stories who became a Christian in his thirties, wrote:

“Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself

a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

Next, Immanuel means we have *dignity*. Who are you? Are you anything more than the sum of your atoms, which have gathered for a blink in the great impersonal sweep of time, and which will one day disperse? Put bluntly, are you anything more than a meaningless speck, no more or less important than any other speck? Are you worth anything other than your contribution to society or your usefulness to the economy? Yes—because there is a Creator God, who visited his world as Immanuel. We each have an intrinsic value and nothing that anyone else can do to us, or that we can do to ourselves, reduces or extinguishes that value. You are precious, however you feel, whatever you do, however useful you are. Nobody is a nobody to God.

Lastly, Immanuel means we know that we are *loved*. I have a friend who, when he had just started working in London, used his salary and all his savings to fly to Australia for the weekend. By the time he'd got through airport security in Sydney, he only had five hours before he needed to check in for his return flight. Why did he make that journey? To see his girlfriend. What did all that effort say to that girl? *I love you. I care about you.* He could have sent a letter, but it would not

have said as much. Instead, he gave himself. That said it all.

God's Son gave up far more, and travelled far further, than my friend—from the throne of heaven to a Middle-Eastern manger. Why make the journey? Because he loves us. He cares about us. God could have sent a letter, but it would never have said as much. He gave himself—and that says it all.

God the Father could have given you anything. What he chose to give you, me, all of us, is the most precious gift he has, and the gift we most need. He chose to give us clarity, so that we could know there is more than this life; know that we have value; and know that we are loved. God the Father has given us not a thing, but a person. He has given us his Son, as a baby.

But as you stand in God's living room, you don't have too long to think about all this. It's time to open the next present—and now it's the Son picking up a present from under the tree, ready to give it to... his Father.

